



A Wild Bride For The Wealthy Rancher

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Daphne Barnes

Contents

Copyright
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Copyright

Copyright © 2021 by Daphne Barnes

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form
without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part
of this document in either electronic means or in printed format.
Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage
of this document is not allowed unless with written permission
from the publisher.

Spring, 1878

As soon as she opened her eyes, Lottie Pelletier tried not to groan at the early hour.

The rooster was crowing, announcing to the world that the sun would soon be rising. She allowed herself a few minutes to fully wake up before leaving her warm bed.

After slipping on a faded dress, she went into the kitchen and got the fire going in the wood stove, hoping her father would be getting up soon and would start some coffee.

She quickly brushed her long blond hair and braided it so that it hung down her back. Lottie hesitated for a moment before grabbing her sister's heavy winter coat and heading outside.

It was early March in Maine and she was glad for the coat's warmth, especially since her own wrap was growing thin and worn. She tried not to think of the reason why her sister no longer wore the coat as she fashioned the large buttons in an effort to keep out the cold wind.

She began the morning chores almost by rote, something she had done every morning since she was a young girl. Seeds were scattered on the ground for the chickens to peck at while she gathered the eggs.

After setting the full basket on the porch, Lottie gave the pigs their breakfast, then went inside the barn to milk the cow. While she worked, she tried to keep her mind off the reason why she was doing all of this alone.

Just a month ago, her mother and younger sister had gone to work at the textile factory located in the nearby city of Aston. Lottie had also worked there, but she hadn't gone to the factory that day because she hadn't been feeling well.

Only a few hours later, she and her father had heard the terrible news.

There had been an explosion in the factory, which had started a large fire inside the rundown building. More than fifty people had died, including her mother and sister.

The fire had shut the entire factory down.

Now Lottie was alone in the world, except for her father, of course. But because of his intense grief, she might as well be on her own.

Before the accident, she and her younger sister, Ellen, had taken care of the morning chores before they went to work. Lottie desperately missed this time she'd had with Ellen and had many fond memories of laughing and joking together with her sister as they took care of the chores.

When they finished, they would go into the house and eat a filling

breakfast their mother would prepare. Then, the three of them would walk into Aston to the factory while her father worked on the farm.

It had been the best part of her days.

As she milked the cow, Lottie felt moisture on her face and realized she was crying. Angrily, she wiped the tears away.

Crying wouldn't bring back her mother and sister, and it definitely wouldn't change her circumstances.

While she was grateful she was alive, especially since she knew she most likely would have also died if she had gone to work on that fateful day, she hated how much her life had changed.

When the milk pail was full, Lottie set it aside and began to clean out the stalls in the barn. As she worked, the sun began to rise and she grew warm in the coat, but she was reluctant to take it off.

Wearing it made her feel close to Ellen.

Finally done with the chores, Lottie went inside to start breakfast, carrying in the milk and eggs. She was glad to see her father sitting at the kitchen table, but she could also immediately tell that this day wasn't going to be good for him.

Many days, he barely even acknowledged that she was around. On other days, he got up when she did and worked hard around the farm until the sun set and he could no longer see.

Now, he hardly glanced at her as she walked into the kitchen, only grunting when she greeted him.

But he had started the coffee, though, and Lottie gratefully poured herself a cup. She took a sip of the hot brew and set it aside so she could mix up some batter for pancakes.

“The chores are done,” she said in the silence, trying to get her father to talk to her.

She tried not to sigh when he didn’t respond. Anger filled her and she did her best to shove it down.

Her father was mourning for his wife and daughter. Lottie was doing the same. But she sometimes wanted to shake him, just to get a reaction.

Yes, her mother and sister were both gone, but she was still alive. Didn't she matter to him anymore?

But she also knew from experience that if she tried to demand her father's attention, he would only push her way. Not wanting to be rejected one more time, she focused her energy on breakfast.

While they ate, her father did start talking. He had a long list of things he wanted to get done around the farm that day.

Lottie tried to pay attention, but she was thinking about what she should do with her time.

The farm had been in their family since the beginning of the century, passed down from father to son. In the past, it had been a successful farm—they had raised enough cattle, pigs, and chickens to support themselves, as well as sell their surplus to their neighbors.

Her mother had also planted a large vegetable garden, and they

sold anything they didn't use. Her father planted a few fields of alfalfa for hay, which he also sold.

Over the last few years, however, the amount of rain they received each year had dwindled, and now the farm wasn't making as much money as it used to.

Because of this, Lottie, along with Ellen and her mother, had agreed to work in the factory, just until things could turn around on the farm—although she had often wondered if it was really worth it.

Even between the three of them, they hadn't made much money, especially for the hours they had been forced to work. But every penny helped.

"What are your plans for the day?" her father asked, breaking through her thoughts.

Lottie turned her attention to her father and studied him for a moment. She hoped he would be willing to let her help more on the farm, but maybe she should try to find another job to bring in an additional income.

She could work during the day and still help with the chores in the early morning and evenings. Maybe if she could begin to make money again, he wouldn't worry so much about their finances.

"I was thinking of going into Aston to see if I could find a job," she commented, watching her father's face carefully.

She saw his relief before he quickly wiped it away and she knew he was glad she intended to find work. He didn't want her helping him in any other way.

“Try to find something that's close to the farm so that you can walk,” he advised her. “But I think it’s a good idea.”

After cleaning up breakfast and doing the dishes, Lottie put on her best dress and began the long walk to Aston. Their farm was located about an hour’s walk from the city.

Aston was close to the border between Maine and New Hampshire. It was a small city, but it was growing and new businesses seemed to open up almost monthly.

Lottie would try to find some work, but part of her hoped there wasn’t anything available. Maybe then she could do what she loved and work on the farm.

Her father couldn’t stop her from helping if she couldn’t find other work, could he?

She loved being outdoors and working the land, inhaling the fresh smell of alfalfa and taking care of the animals. The vegetable garden needed to be prepared for planting, something her mother would have already started by now.

Lottie was aware her father had always been disappointed that he’d never had a son, although he had never said as much—and especially not to her.

She’d had a few conversations with him in the past, hoping he would go ahead and let her inherit the land even though she wasn't a male, but that was something he would never even consider.

In his mind, farming was a man’s job to work on the farm, not a woman’s.

When she arrived in the city, Lottie stopped in front of the first likely business that might consider hiring her: a small general store.

She would start here, and if they weren't hiring, she would just continue down the street. There had to be at least one business that would be looking for someone.

Stepping inside the general store, she could immediately tell they needed some help.

The shelves were fully stocked, but they were dusty, and a bunch of crates had been stacked against a wall, ready to be emptied. The floor also looked like it needed a good cleaning.

“Can I help you?”

Lottie turned around and put on her best smile for the owner, Mr. Hansen. Her family always shopped at this store unless they needed supplies he didn't offer. She hoped this would make a difference in him deciding to offer her a job.

“Yes. I'm wondering if you're looking for some help in your store.”

“Help with what?” Mr. Hansen asked, looking confused.

She gestured around the store. “I'm a hard worker. I could sweep, keep the shelves stocked and clean, and...”

She stopped talking when Mr. Hansen began to shake his head. “I'm not looking to hire anyone. I take care of this store just fine on my own.

“Now, if you're here to purchase something, let me know.

Otherwise, move on.”

Lottie wanted to try to convince him that she could help and make a difference, but she could tell by his clenched jaw that she wasn't going to be able to change his mind. Instead, she sighed and left.

The next business was a café a few buildings away from the general store. There was actually a “help wanted” sign in the window, but the owner wasn’t interested in hiring her.

She knew he wasn’t against hiring women since there were two already working, but she did get a glimpse as to why he had turned her away.

He had looked her over from head to foot, disgust written across his face. He hadn’t wanted her because she wore a simple, faded farm dress, letting him know she was from a poor family.

Over the next few hours, Lottie experienced almost the exact same reaction from everyone. No one was looking for extra help, or if they were, they wanted someone different than her.

Some business owners even mocked her, saying that they would never hire a woman over a man. A few people were sympathetic to her plight, though, especially when she brought up the subject of the burned-down factory and why she was looking for work.

“That was an awful thing that happened,” Mrs. Lacey, who owned a dress shop, said with a sorrowful shake of her head. “A lot of people were killed and it put many others out of work.

“It's too bad you didn't come by last week. My best seamstress quit on me and I had to hire two women to replace her.”

When Lottie left the dress shop, even though she was willing to do anything to get a job, she was almost glad Mrs. Lacey couldn't hire her.

The idea of sitting and sewing all day would have driven her crazy. Even at the factory, she was constantly moving.

By midafternoon, she had approached at least ten different businesses with no luck in finding a job, and she needed to head home so she could start dinner for her father.

As she walked back to her house, she felt hot and grubby even though there was a cool breeze. She was glad to get out of the hot sun and into the cool farmhouse.

Judging from the position of the sun, her father would be coming in for dinner soon.

She quickly began to reheat some stew that she had made the day before and then she did some house chores that needed to be done while it cooked. When her father arrived, she filled a bowl for him and added two thick slices of bread before preparing her own food.

"Any luck in finding a job?" her father asked curiously and with a hopeful expression.

Lottie shook her head.

"I guess I should have gone into Aston last week. The closing of the factory put a lot of people out of work and most of the businesses who were hiring have already taken on new employees."

She glanced at him and tried to look confident. "Don't worry, I'll keep looking. I'm sure I'll be able to find something sooner or

later.”

“That's too bad. I've been thinking about your plight all day and do have an idea of what you could do,” her father answered. “I don't know why I didn't think of this option before now.”

Lottie looked at him with interest, hoping that he was going to tell her that he had changed his mind and let her help around the farm.

Between the two of them, she was sure they could get the farm going again and be profitable. She actually had a few ideas of her own that could help.

She was a hard-working woman, the type of person that would be able to survive in any type of environment that the universe placed her in—as long as she was given a chance.

“You should get married.”

Lottie stared at her father for a moment, certain that she had heard him wrong. Even though she was already twenty-two years old, he had never made such a suggestion before.

Most of the girls she had gone to school with were already married, and a few of them already had a child or two of their own.

But he had always told her and Ellen that they had a home with their parents as long as they needed one. What had changed his mind that Lottie needed to marry now?

He ate a large spoonful of stew and it almost seemed he was doing his best to avoid looking at her.

“What did you say?” she finally asked.

He swallowed the food that was in his mouth and then leaned back in his chair with a sigh as he finally looked at her.

“Lottie, I hate that I need to even suggest this, but the farm is struggling. You know that,” he began. “I’m aware that you would rather help me than do anything else, but it’s not as profitable as it used to be, not with the drought over the last few years.

“The stream that runs along the edge of the farm is drying up and it’s only March. I don’t know how much longer we will be able to stay here,” he admitted. “Besides, I still feel like a woman shouldn’t have to work as hard as a man would on this land.”

“What are you saying?” she pressed, wishing that he would just come out and say what was on his mind.

What did getting married have to do with how much it was or wasn’t raining? And didn’t he realize how hard she had needed to work in the factory?

Yes, it had been a different type of work, but it had still been difficult. She remembered many times coming home so exhausted from her hours at the factory she had been too tired to eat dinner before falling into bed, only to get up the next morning and do the same thing again.

She had never told her father, but she’d hated working at the factory. Ellen and her mother had, too, but they had willingly worked so they could help contribute to the finances and not lose the farm.

“I’m saying I might need to sell the farm. This is why I’m

suggesting that you get married. Aston is a big enough city that I'm sure you could find someone who would be willing to marry you."

Lottie pushed her bowl of stew away, suddenly not feeling a bit hungry.

Her father seemed to be telling her it would be perfectly understandable for her to accept any man who wanted to marry her, no matter who it was. He just wanted her out of his life so he could make his own plans for the farm.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she bit her lip to keep them from falling.

Just the fact that her father was suggesting she get married was another sign of how much he had changed since the loss of her mother and Ellen. Before the tragedy, he would have never encouraged her to marry just for the sake of it.

"Just consider the idea." He took a last bite of stew and then turned away.

A few minutes later, the screen door banged behind him as he went outside to do the evening chores.

Lottie sat at the kitchen table for a long time. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and this time she did nothing to stop them.

She wished so badly that things were the way they used to be. She missed her mother and sister so much. And as much as she hated to admit it, she felt like she had also lost her father.

He was a shell of the man he used to be.

She thought about her father's suggestion, but even if she agreed with his plan, none of the men she was acquainted with in Aston would want to marry her. She was too outspoken, too rough around the edges.

She also wanted to marry for love, not convenience. One of the things she did remember about her parents was the deep love they had for each other. She wanted the same or not to marry at all.

Besides, there was no one out there who would want someone like her.

She thought of the different business owners she had interacted with in Aston that day. Most of them were patronizing toward her, and one had even teased her for even thinking he'd want to hire her.

No one wanted a simple farm girl to work for them. Even if she was willing to marry, those types of men were not what she could imagine for her future.

It didn't take long to clean up the supper dishes. Her father hadn't come in yet from doing the evening chores and the sun was still shining in the west, but she went into her room for the night.

She just couldn't deal with the unspoken expectations her father now had of her.

But even hours after the sun had set, Lottie couldn't fall asleep. All she could think about was her father's suggestion.

If she didn't marry, she would need to find a job, one way or another. Her father had given her the definite message without saying the actual words.

Lottie was on her own.

In the corner of the ballroom, Kent Golightly stood with a drink in his hand. The room was full of people acting happy to be there. But in his opinion, they were dripping with opulence.

From his vantage point, he watched each person as they walked by him.

This ball was one that the Denver elite all wanted to be invited to. Because of his father's business running several general stores in the area, Kent's family was part of that group.

He could tell anyone who asked the name of each attendee, why they were at the ball, and even an approximate estimate of the size of their house and bank account, just by looking at the clothing they wore.

At one point, a woman about his mother's age glided by. Her hand grasped firmly on the arm of her daughter, Mrs. Carlton gave Kent a knowing glance.

"There are many men here who would be willing to dance with you, my dear. All you need to do is smile, Amelia," he heard the woman say. "None of the men here will be able to resist your

smile.”

Kent had to stifle a laugh when the frown on Amelia’s face immediately turned into a smile, although he could tell it was forced. It seemed everyone was here for the sole purpose of either finding a husband, or helping their daughters find husbands.

The single men were here to not only see what women were available to be courted, but also to brag about their business ventures.

Mrs. Carlton’s eyes lit up as she realized that Kent was standing alone and she began to make her way in his direction, dragging her daughter behind her.

Kent immediately turned on his heel and quickly walked away. He had no desire to be forced into a dance with a young woman he wasn’t interested in.

Despite his attendance at the ball, he wasn’t looking to marry at this point in his life. He was only twenty-five and he figured he had many years before he needed to make that decision.

He set his empty glass down on a table occupied by one of his friends, Andrew White, a man he hadn't seen for a few months.

“Good evening, Andrew,” Kent greeted his friend warmly.

“It’s great to see you, Kent,” Andrew said as they shook hands. “It’s been a while. How have you been doing? I’m sure your father is keeping you busy with all of those stores.”

Kent shrugged, not wanting to talk about the family business. Instead, he directed the conversation toward Andrew and his own

business ventures.

A few other men joined their group while Andrew began to expand on what he was doing with his time. Kent wasn't surprised to hear that Andrew's father was grooming him to take a position at a nearby bank.

If all worked out, he would someday be running his own bank. It was what all of their fathers expected their sons to do, learn the family business so that they could take over someday.

The other men also began to talk about their business ventures, bragging and embellishing as necessary. It was almost like they were trying to make themselves sound better than the other men around them, and Kent had to wonder how much of the stories that were told were true.

This was something Kent had always despised. While he had never wished that his parents weren't well-to-do, he did wonder why it was always so important for everyone around him to flaunt their wealth.

He wished his life was different and that he had the freedom to decide his own future. He also couldn't help but wonder if any of these men who surrounded him also wished the same, deep down, but would never admit it.

He felt a tap on his shoulder, and he turned.

"Mr. Golightly, I would like to introduce my daughter."

Kent stifled a groan when he saw that Mrs. Carlton had followed him.

“Mother, I already know him,” Amelia muttered with embarrassment. “We went to school together.”

Kent wanted to laugh at that comment. He had attended school with Amelia, but she was much younger and they had never interacted.

Mrs. Carlton waved her words away. “It’s still best to be properly introduced. Mr. Golightly, may I present my oldest daughter, Amelia Carlton.”

Knowing what was expected of him, Kent gave Amelia a welcoming smile. “It’s nice to see you again.”

He could tell Amelia felt embarrassed because of her mother’s actions, but she also looked at him hopefully.

“Miss Amelia, would you like to dance?” he asked, resigned.

Her face beamed with pleasure. “Yes I would, thank you.”

With Amelia’s hand tucked in his arm, Kent led her to the dance floor. As they waltzed around the room, Kent asked her all the usual questions.

Where did she live? What did she like to do with her time? Was she enjoying the dance?

She answered his questions and began to chatter. She talked about how wonderful the ball was. She had a comment about almost every couple who passed them on the dance floor.

She even pointed out her best friend. “Mary is dancing with her beau, and I’m sure they will be engaged by the end of the

evening.”

Amelia paused for a moment as if she needed to take a breath from her talking. “Oh, my goodness. Did you see that?” She sounded disgusted by whatever she was looking at.

Kent looked around but didn’t see what Amelia was referring to. Luckily, she kept talking.

“There is Sarah Mendenhall. Can you believe what she’s wearing? It looks absolutely awful.”

Kent looked at Sarah, who was standing at the edge of the dance floor with her mother by her side. There was a bored expression on Sarah’s face, but also a hint of longing as she watched the couples dance around her.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Sarah’s mother refuses to let her choose her own gowns. But yellow? She looks like a wild sunflower.”

Amelia giggled and looked at Kent, as if she expected him to laugh along with her. “It really clashes with her red hair.”

She frowned when Kent looked away, leading her away from Sarah. He tried to think of something to say, a kind way of letting Amelia know he didn’t like how she was making fun of Sarah.

But Amelia didn’t seem upset that Kent wasn’t willing to laugh at the expense of someone else and continued to talk about other things. He did his best to tune Amelia's voice out.

They'd only been dancing a few minutes, but he hadn't been able to get a word in edgewise. He breathed a sigh of relief with the last

notes faded from the orchestra and he was able to escort Amelia to her mother's side, give a formal bow of thanks, and turn away.

He noticed the disappointment in Amelia's eyes, but he had done his duty by dancing with her. He wouldn't be expected to do so again this evening, since it was frowned upon for men to dance with the same partner more than once.

He made his way back to Andrew even though he didn't want to continue the same conversation he had left behind. This was another thing he didn't like about these balls.

It seemed like all the men wanted to do was discuss business and brag about their accomplishments and dealings while the women did their best to put each other down, trying to make themselves look better in the eyes of the men they danced with.

Everyone was wearing masks, hiding their true selves from everybody else—although Kent had to wonder, what did his mask look like to those around him?

He pulled out his pocket watch to look at the time and groaned when he realized that he still had another two hours to endure.

He thought of his twin sister, Katherine. She hadn't been able to attend the ball because she'd come down with a head cold.

In his opinion, Kathy was lucky to miss all of this, and he wondered if he could convince their parents that he should head home with the excuse that he wanted to check on his sister.

"There you are."

Kent turned and saw his father walking toward him. "Hello,

Father.”

“I have been looking all over for you. Come. There's a conversation that I would like to hear in the next room,” his father ordered.

While Kent didn't want to have another conversation about business, he willingly followed his father, knowing this excuse would keep him from being forced to dance with other young women like Amelia.

His father led him into a large library where five other men his father's age sat around a large oak table. The men all stood when his father approached them and nodded politely while Kent was introduced to them. Kent shook hands with each man.

After the introductions, everyone took their seats and Kent sat down in an empty chair next to his father. He was a bit curious as to why his father had brought him here.

He only recognized one man, Mr. Samuel Rodgers. He had never met the other four men.

“Mr. Hoover has been telling us about how he has invested in a silver mine in the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” his father announced as he gestured toward a stocky bald man who sat across from them. “He has convinced me that this is a great business option.”

Kent's father looked at him. “You know I've been looking for another business to invest in. I think this is something our family should consider.”

For a moment, Kent was confused. His father had never wanted to work with other men in any of his business endeavors.

He always said that when a man becomes a partner with another, they lose control over what could be happening in the business. It was better to be the top boss and hire people under them.

“Gentlemen, hearing about this new idea of silver mines has given me a great one of my own. I have decided that I am going to purchase some property in Nevada. My son will run the mine.”

All of the men's faces brightened. “You are so lucky that you have a son who is willing to try new things,” Mr. Rodgers said with approval.

“I am very aware how blessed I am,” his father replied with a proud glance at Kent.

Kent's father was watching him carefully from the corner of his eye even though his attention was on the other men. Now wasn't the time to voice his objections to his father's announcement.

Operating a silver mine in the wilds of Nevada was the last thing Kent wanted to do, but he needed to act like he was happy and excited about this idea.

As he played his part in front of his father's friends, he knew he needed to let his father know that he had plans for his future—and they had nothing to do with running a mine or any other business idea his father might come up with.

Kent hadn't told his parents about his plans yet, mainly because he already knew they wouldn't approve of what he wanted to do. But he wondered if he had made a mistake in not telling them, especially now that his father was trying to push him in a direction he didn't want.

He excused himself from the group of men as soon as he could and spent the rest of the evening talking with his friends or dancing when he couldn't get out of it.

Again, he felt like he was completely different from the people around him.

If any of these people were aware of his dream, would they still want to interact with him? Would Mrs. Carlton still want Amelia to dance with him?

He was sure most of them would look at him with scorn.

When the ball was finally over, he joined his parents in their stagecoach, heading to their large mansion in the middle of Denver. Kent listened silently as his father told his mother about this new idea for a family business, purchasing land and running a silver mine in Nevada.

It was all he could do to stay quiet as his father talked. Of course, his mother was absolutely thrilled with the idea.

"I knew your father would be able to come up with something you could do," his mother gushed as she patted her husband's leg.

She gave him a soft kiss on his cheek before turning to Kent. "Isn't this a wonderful opportunity?"

Kent hesitated long enough to make his mother concerned, but she misunderstood the reason for his silence.

"Oh, I know you don't have any experience in running a mine, but you know how to run a business, thanks to your father's tutelage, and I'm sure there will be little difference."

Kent wanted to laugh at her words. He didn't know much about silver mining, but he was sure there would be a huge difference between running a mine and operating the stores his father owned.

He cleared his throat—it was time to let them know that he wasn't interested in this opportunity. He only hoped they would listen to him.

“Father, Mother. There's actually something else I would rather do.”

Both of his parents looked at him in shock, as if they were surprised that he even said anything. His father immediately assumed he meant something else.

“Now, Kent, as much as I would love to have you work with me, there just isn't enough work for both of us.”

Kent gave a slight shake of his head. In his opinion, there was plenty of work to keep him, but he knew his father felt like the stores didn't make enough money to fully support two households in the manner his father expected, something that had never been terribly important to Kent.

His father continued. “At twenty-five, you're getting old enough to start thinking about how you will support a family in the manner they deserve. Operating a silver mine will enable you to provide for a wife and children.”

“I don't want to work in the stores and I don't want to operate a mine. I have my own dreams.”

“What are they, my dear?” his mother asked curiously.

He took a deep breath, praying they would be willing to at least listen. "I want to start my own cattle ranch."

He knew he had shocked his parents into silence because neither of them said a word for a long moment.

Then his father laughed as if Kent had just made a great joke. "Don't be ridiculous. No son of mine is going to be a rancher, so you might as well get that idea out of your head right now."

"Father, please, if you could just hear me out," Kent pleaded, desperately wanting the man to listen to him, just this once. "I've been thinking about this for a long time, and—"

His father interrupted and began to tell Kent exactly what he wanted him to do to get started on the mine. What Kent wanted wasn't going to be taken seriously. His father would never allow him to talk about his plans.

Kent had a large folder full of his ideas that he could show his father, if he thought it would do any good. This was something he had been planning for a long time.

But if he wanted to keep the peace with his parents, he was going to have to conform and do what they wanted. He would need to give up his dreams.

When his father realized Kent wasn't going to respond to his plans for the mine, the rest of the ride home was made in silence.

Kent knew he had greatly upset his parents, but he had to remind himself that he was a grown man. He had every right to go the direction that he wanted to go.

He just had to figure out how he could do so without upsetting them more than he already had.

A month had passed since that fateful night of the ball, and

Kent had done his best to convince his father to allow him to pursue his own dreams. He had even tried to show his father the folder he had put together. But his father wouldn't hear of it.

Without Kent's consent, his father had made a trip to Nevada and purchased a large plot of land. He then began his plans of putting a mine into operation.

Kent finally gave in, knowing he didn't have a choice. Especially when his father threatened to cut off all financial help from Kent if he kept talking about wanting to be a rancher.

Having that threat hanging over his head angered him. It seemed money was always used to control others, and his father wasn't any different.

Kent did have his own money, a trust fund that his father had set up for him the day he was born. He had gained control of it when he had turned twenty-five a few months ago.

It was money his father would no longer touch, but the trust fund wasn't enough to purchase his own land. Kent resigned himself to

the fact that he would have to be a mine operator whether he liked it or not, at least for the immediate future.

Finally, it came time for him to leave Denver and head to Nevada. The only bright spot was that Kathy was coming with him.

He had always been close with his sister, and when Kathy found out about his dreams, she promised him that she would do what she could to help.

Even though Kent wasn't sure what Kathy could do, he would enjoy having his sister with him as he started his new life.

Kathy had been raised to be a perfect society woman, but she was also bored with her life of luxury.

Kent often wondered why his parents, especially his mother, weren't putting pressure on Kathy to get married, as any well-to-do young woman would do. After all, she was also twenty-five.

But he was glad for her sake that she wasn't required to live a life she didn't want to.

It took a full four days to travel from Denver to the property his father had bought in Nevada. Kent wasn't at all impressed with the scenery they passed on most of the trip.

Once they got past the Utah territory, everything was flat and dry. Sagebrush and cacti scattered the landscape, with tall, towering mountains in the distance.

While he loved the idea of living near mountains, at the moment they negatively represented the life he was being forced to live.

When they finally arrived at their destination, Kent made arrangements for them to stay at a nearby hotel for one night in the small town of Green Valley.

By then it was midafternoon, and he was weary from traveling and wanted to rest. But Kathy convinced him to find some horses and ride out to their property.

After some searching, he was able to rent two well-trained horses from the local livery.

Kent wasn't at all excited to see the land, especially knowing that was where he was going to have to live and work, doing what he didn't want to do, but they set off on their way. The town of Green Valley was actually nicer than he had expected for a western town.

Following the map his father had given him, they soon arrived on his new land. They both stopped in amazement at what they saw, and Kent was glad that he had listened to Kathy and didn't wait until the next day to see it.

In front of him was the most beautiful landscape he'd ever seen.

There was a large expanse of land that was fairly flat and the Sierra Nevada Mountains rose nearby. He didn't know what he had expected, but it was nothing like he had imagined.

They easily found a small cabin that had been built years ago and was part of the purchase of the property. The cabin was in the middle of a green meadow filled with many kinds of wildflowers. A small stream that obviously came from the mountains ran by the edge of the grassy area.

"Wow," Kathy breathed. "This looks like a little bit of heaven on

earth.”

Kent didn’t answer, but he agreed with her. He could see the area where the mine was, and a sadness hit his soul at the thought of destroying this beautiful landscape.

They spent a full two hours riding around the land, until the sun began to set. As Kent explored, he could easily picture the ranch that he wanted to run here.

There was plenty of grass and water, and it was exactly what he had planned in his mind. He couldn’t have found a better piece of property, which he found incredibly ironic.

“What are you thinking?” Kathy asked quietly.

Kent decided he needed to be up front with her. “This land would be perfect for my ranch. It’s making me want to go forward with my dream even more.”

She didn’t answer, just watched him.

Suddenly, he knew exactly what he was going to do. “And I intend to do everything I can to make that happen.”

Kathy studied her brother for a moment and then grinned. “Good for you. I think it’s a great idea and I will do everything I can to help.”

“What can you do?” Kent asked. While he knew that Kathy was aware of his dreams, he didn’t expect her to encourage him in that way.

He didn’t even want to think about what his father was going to do

when he found out that Kent wasn't going to run the mine like what was expected of him.

"I have a dream of my own," Kathy confessed.

She didn't look at him, but off in the distance. While Kent was looking at the grassy landscape around him, her focus was on the nearby mountains, where the mine would be.

"What's your dream?" Kent asked, hoping he could do something to help her.

She glanced at him before turning her attention back to the mountains. "I would love the chance to run the mine on my own."

Kent stared at his sister in disbelief, as well as in shock. But then he grinned. "You want to run the mine? How do you think you can do that?"

He knew Kathy understood what he didn't want to say, that running a mine would be incredibly difficult for a woman.

"Father has already hired a man, Mr. Riley Guthrie, to find workers for the mine. I could find out if Mr. Guthrie would be willing to stay on and oversee them, while I would take care of the finance end of things."

Kent immediately liked her idea. Kathy had always been strong with arithmetic and she had often helped their father with the accounting and books for their stores.

Though Father hadn't exactly liked the idea that his daughter enjoyed working with numbers, he had never discouraged her. His only requirement was that Kathy never tell anyone she was

helping.

“I think it's an excellent idea. You would do a wonderful job with that. In fact, maybe I should hire you to help with my ranch, too.”

“I could do that.” Kathy nodded eagerly. “But how are we going to keep this from Father?”

Kent thought for a moment. “He did inform me before we left that he would stay in Denver until June. I know he wants to see what I can do on my own, though he never expressed as much to me.”

“June is about two months away. That should give us enough time to get the mine and your ranch started,” Kathy said. “Maybe when he finally does come and he sees how successful we both are, he'll be willing to let us run our lives as we see fit.”

As they guided their horses back to Green Valley, they began to plan and discussed what they would need to start with the next day. The more they talked and planned, the more excited Kent grew.

He was finally going to do what he loved.

“I do have one question,” Kathy said at one point. “How are you going to get started?”

Kent knew what she wasn't saying. He had never worked outside a day in his life and there were going to be a lot of adjustments.

He had a lot to learn. But he was willing to do whatever was necessary to have a successful ranch.

“Maybe I could do what you are doing and find a man who would

be willing to work as a foreman, but who would also be willing to teach me everything he knows about ranching,” Kent suggested.

They spent most of the next day purchasing what they felt they needed for the small cabin. Kent also bought two horses and a wagon to cart their belongings to their property.

Once they arrived, they found places for everything in the cabin.

It was a bit rundown and very small. There was only one bedroom, and Kent allowed Kathy to have the room while he would sleep on the porch.

He would need to get a house built, but that could wait. He was glad the weather was warm enough to keep the horses in a small field nearby because a barn also needed to be built.

On their first day in the cabin, Kathy did her best to prepare a meal for them both. Although Kent didn't say anything, it was awful.

The bread was dry and stale. She'd tried to fry potatoes and burned half of them. And the carrots she'd attempted to boil were still raw when they sat down to eat.

“You don't have to eat this. I know that it's not very good,” Kathy said, disappointment in her voice.

“It's fine,” Kent commented as he took a large bite of burnt potatoes and did his best to swallow.

“You should think about hiring a housekeeper since I will be busy at the mine. I won't have time to clean and cook for us,” Kathy said. “Besides, it's obvious I don't have any skill for it.”

Kent didn't answer. Since Kathy had been raised in high society, she didn't know how to cook, just like he didn't know how to work with animals.

But he didn't like the idea of spending money that would be better used getting the ranch started.

"We both have a lot of things to learn, I think," he finally said.

Then Kathy's eyes lit up. "I have an idea! The day before we left Denver, I went shopping with Mother. I saw a newspaper in the general store that had many ads for mail-order brides."

Kent looked at her in confusion. "What is a mail-order bride?"

"I was wondering the same thing, so I asked the store owner. He told me how a lot of men who live in the Western part of our country are living in small towns.

"In some areas, there are very few women available to marry. So, men place ads in this newspaper to try to entice women who live back east to come out west and marry them."

"That sounds a bit risky," Kent commented.

"I thought the same. It's not something I would ever consider, of course, but I wonder if it might be a good solution for you."

Kent scowled. He was sure Kathy wasn't thinking clearly.

There might be a handful of women desperate enough to travel clear across the country just to marry a man they'd never met before, but he doubted there were many of them.

“You could place an ad in that newspaper and see if there's a woman who would want to come to Nevada.” Her face lit up even more. “Maybe you can find someone who knows about ranching. Then she could help you.”

Kent just shook his head and changed the subject.

Over the next few days, he stayed busy as he tried to find a man who would want to work for him. But he didn't have much to offer in the way of salary, especially for a man who would also be willing to teach him what he knew, so no one took him up on his offer.

He spent much of his time riding around the property, making decisions of where fields could be built and how much cattle he could logically purchase.

While he worked, he couldn't seem to get Kathy's suggestion out of his mind. Maybe it wouldn't hurt for him to place an ad for a mail-order bride. He could ask Kathy to help him write an ad.

There might be a young woman out there who wouldn't mind helping him start his ranch up. He just hoped he wouldn't regret his decision.

Lottie trudged home from her latest trip into Aston feeling very discouraged.

She had spent the last few weeks doing everything she could to find a job, but to no avail. No one was willing to hire her, and she was turned away time and time again.

Some of them would have been willing to hire her, if they could, but money was scarce and times were hard. Most people were doing their best to just put food on their own tables.

She didn't know what she was going to do.

Her father spoke almost daily about wanting to put the farm up for sale; it was only a matter of time before he did so.

He hadn't brought up the subject of marriage again, but Lottie was beginning to wonder if that was going to be her only option, although she didn't know who she could convince to marry her.

That day, the last thing she did before she left Aston was stop into a store to purchase a few newspapers from other Eastern cities.

Maybe it was time for her to consider looking outside of this area. The larger cities had to have some type of work she could do.

While she loved Maine and had never considered leaving this beautiful state, perhaps she needed to broaden her search.

When she finally arrived home, her father was sitting at the kitchen table and seemed to be waiting for her expectantly.

“Any luck in finding a job?” he asked, almost eagerly.

Lottie shook her head, and sadness filled her. So much had changed in her life over the last few months, including her relationship with her father.

“I have some news for you. I’ve found a buyer for the farm.”

“What do you mean, a buyer?” Lottie asked in shock.

At that moment, she realized that, deep down, she’d never thought her father would actually follow through with his plans to sell the farm, even though he talked about it almost every day.

This land had been in their family for so long, she had hoped it would have made a difference for him. But, obviously, she was wrong.

Part of her wanted to once again beg him to allow her to help more. She still felt like she could make a difference if they only would work together. But his next words kept her silent.

“I’m getting old, Lottie. It’s getting harder for me to work on the farm.” He rubbed his right knee. “I twisted my leg a few days ago chasing after the pig that got out of her pen.

“I know you disagree, but I think selling the farm is the best decision for us.” He looked off into the distance. “Maybe I won’t miss your ma as much.”

Those words twisted inside Lottie, reminding her that he deeply grieved for his wife. It was probably torture for him to continue living here.

Tears pricked her own eyes and she had to blink rapidly to force them away. She sometimes missed Ellen and her mother so much, she didn’t know if she could ever move past their deaths.

“Where are you going to go?” she asked quietly and wondered if he was going to ask her to go with him. His next words let her know what he was thinking.

“I’ve already found some rooms in Aston that I can rent, but...” He didn’t finish his sentence.

Lottie did it for him. “There isn’t enough room for me.”

He didn’t need to say it. He was telling her it was time she made her own way in the world.

She listened with half an ear as he described the boarding house where he would be living, but she wanted to yell at him, “What about me?”

After father had gone to bed, Lottie lit a lantern, set it on the kitchen table, and spent the next few hours going through the newspapers that she had purchased. But the more she looked, the more discouraged she became.

There were very few jobs available for women. If she did move to

another city, she would still have a hard time finding work, even if she went door to door like she had been doing in Aston.

At least here, people knew who she was. She wouldn't have that in the bigger cities.

There were factories that she could probably get a job with, but that was the last thing she wanted to do. Eventually, she would end up dying early just like her sister and mother had.

Besides, most factory jobs were dangerous work, and she would be lucky if she made enough to support herself.

She began to fold up the papers when she saw something interesting at the back of one of them.

There were a number of ads written by men who were looking for wives. She had heard of this scenario before but had never been interested in looking into the option.

She thought of the advice her father had given her a few weeks before about getting married. Maybe this was an answer.

Even though she still was determined to marry for love, she was beginning to see that this wasn't a realistic dream. How many women actually found their soulmate, anyway?

She slowly pulled the paper closer to the lantern and began to carefully read through each ad. Most of them she dismissed outright.

One man said he had six children who needed a mother. She didn't think she would have the patience to raise that many children who weren't even hers.

Another man described himself as a “mature man,” which she interpreted as much older than herself. If she was going to do this, she definitely wanted to find someone closer to her age.

Then, she found one that intrigued her.

Wanted, a young woman between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, who would be willing to travel to the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

I'm looking for an outspoken, hard-working woman who would enjoy living on a ranch and who isn't reluctant to work outside in all types of weather.

Please send any correspondence to Green Valley, Nevada, in the care of Kent Golightly.

Lottie started the ad for a long time and wished the man who had placed it would have added more information about the ranch. Was this an answer to her dilemma?

She liked the idea of marrying a man who already had his own land. This man would likely expect her to keep the house clean, but it sounded to her like he also needed help with his ranch.

She could get married like her father wanted her to do, and she wouldn't have to work in a dirty factory barely earning enough money to stay afloat. She would be able to spend her time outside.

She wasn't exactly sure where the Sierra Nevada Mountains were and quickly found an atlas among her father's books. From what she could tell, it was a large range of mountains east of California.

If she were to guess, it would be like traveling to a totally different country—the area where this man lived would be nothing like her

beloved Maine.

Before she could change her mind, she found a piece of paper and answered the ad. After all, even though she was responding to his posting, it didn't mean she had to actually marry him.

She hoped to get to know him through letters and determine what kind of man he really was.

A few weeks after Kent sent off the ad, he received a response. He was actually surprised that a woman had responded to his ad.

In fact, he had spent many hours wishing he hadn't acted so rashly as to place it. Surely, he could figure out how to get the ranch running on his own.

He didn't know how to raise cattle, but he was smart and willing to learn. He was educated and knew how to research information he needed.

Besides, would there actually be a woman out there who would be willing to travel so far to marry a man she hadn't even met?

When the man from the post office handed him the letter, Kent had shoved it in a pocket to be dealt with later. He had also received his weekly letter from Father, wanting a detailed update of what he was doing with the mine.

As the days passed, Kent began to feel guilty about what he and Kathy were keeping from their parents. He always sent a response to his father's letters, but felt like he was lying to him.

He wondered how long he would be able to keep from Father what he and Kathy were doing. But his sister always knew what to write in response to pacify their father's curiosity.

With Mr. Guthrie's help, Kathy was doing a better job than Kent would have in running the mine. She already had ten strong burly men working for her.

Kent spent many days finding cattle to purchase. He finally discovered a man who lived only a few hours away from Green Valley and wanted to sell all of his cattle for a low price.

The man had moved from Texas to start his own cattle ranch, but had decided that he didn't like the harsh winters in this part of Nevada and was moving back to his home state. Kent was thrilled to be able to purchase over one hundred head of cattle, along with two bulls.

He then spent his time building a number of makeshift fences to keep the herd together. It took him twice as long as he knew it should have, but he was learning, and he loved what he was doing.

That night, he showed Kathy the response from his ad.

"Are you going to open it?" she asked eagerly, looking ready to snatch the letter from him if he didn't want to read it right then.

"I guess I should," he responded, but he still didn't open it.

He stared at the return address, which let him know that this woman lived in Maine. He couldn't believe the woman who had answered his ad lived so far away.

"If you don't like this response, I'm sure you'll receive other

letters,” Kathy pointed out. “Just read it and see what she has to say.”

Knowing that his sister was right, he slowly opened the envelope and began to read.

He was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was from a woman who introduced herself as Charlotte, but said that everyone called her Lottie. He found he liked that casual nickname from such a formal name.

She explained that she lived in Aston, Maine, and because of circumstances beyond her control, she needed to make some changes in her life. This was why she was considering being a mail-order bride.

He had to wonder what those circumstances were, but figured he’d find out if they kept writing.

He enjoyed reading the description she wrote of herself, a tall woman who had blonde hair that grew lighter in the sun during the summer months. She had blue eyes that she got from her mother.

She described the farm she helped run with her father, letting him know that she was very familiar with the care of animals and land. The letter made him smile and even laugh a few times.

She spoke of the love she had for the farm and her disappointment that her father was choosing to sell it. She said she loved to work outdoors and look at a job well done at the end of a long day.

When Kent was finished, he let Kathy read the letter, and she encouraged him to write Lottie back.

“This is the kind of person that you will need on the ranch,” she commented enthusiastically. “You definitely want to find a woman who enjoys being outside.”

“A farm is very different from a ranch,” Kent pointed out.

“That’s true, but I think the fact that she has experience in working on a farm will greatly help you. You’re just barely getting started here and I think Lottie would be a great help to you.”

When Kent didn’t respond, Kathy scowled at him. “At least write her back and get to know her a bit more.”

He finally agreed, knowing it wouldn't hurt to send Lottie a response. Over the next month, they exchanged three letters—and with each one, Kent grew more impressed with Lottie.

He could tell she wasn't the most educated person and that she had few social manners by the way she worded some of her sentences. She had definitely not been raised like he and Kathy had.

Her writing often had spelling errors. When he asked her what she liked to do outside of working on her farm, she had confessed that she didn't do much else and didn’t have a hobby.

If his parents were aware that he was writing to a woman like Lottie, they would be appalled and would do everything they could to put a stop to it. But this knowledge made Kent even more determined to give Lottie a chance.

After the third letter, he even began to think about a possible romance between the two of them.

Maybe once she arrived and they got to know each other even

better, they could learn to love each other. But even if love didn't develop between them, he already could tell by her letters that there would be respect.

After a month of writing, and with Kathy's approval, Kent sent a letter to Lottie proposing marriage. The moment he sent the letter off, he pulled some of his own money out of the bank and hired some men to start building a house of his own.

He enjoyed living in the little cabin, but once Lottie arrived, it would be better for them to have their own house. Besides, the cabin was too close to the mine.

When he'd first explored the land, Kent immediately knew exactly where he wanted his house to be built, and it was on the opposite side of the property close to where he was keeping the cattle.

The same stream that ran by the old cabin would also provide fresh water for his house. He also planned to build a large barn once his house was completed.

As he supervised the construction of the house, Kent realized he would need to tell his parents what was going on, and it would need to be sooner rather than later.

Still, he was determined to enjoy this brief time of living the life he wanted and had always dreamed of having.

O *ne Month Later*

Kent paused from digging a hole for a post to build a fence and looked around at his ranch. He was pleased at how fast his house had gone up and it was almost done.

He wasn't sure it had been smart to build such a large home, but he wanted to provide the best he could afford for Lottie. Besides, it still wasn't as large as the house he had grown up in.

When he'd first decided to build the house, he had assumed Kathy would want to live with him, but she had insisted that she could live in the cabin.

"It's small, but plenty big for one person," she had explained after Kent had tried to insist she use one of the four bedrooms his new house would have. "Besides, I don't want to impose on a newly married couple's life together."

It had taken a while, but they finally had reached a compromise. He would build a small cottage for Kathy a short distance away from his house.

He understood her desire to want to be on her own, but the cabin wasn't the best place for Kathy to live. Besides the fact that it was old, and had shingles and part of the rotting logs falling down with every fierce wind, it was too far away from where Kent was building his house.

He wanted his sister close by so he could keep an eye on her. Once Kathy agreed to have a small home built for her, Riley agreed to live in the cabin as part of his pay and keep an eye on the mine.

If he compared his house to his parents', it would be sadly lacking, but Kent loved it. He had purchased long flanks of pine that formed the outside of the house.

It was two stories, with four bedrooms and a room for storage on the second floor, and a living area, an office, and large kitchen on the main floor. The house also boasted a wrap-around porch.

He hoped Lottie would be pleased with her new home.

He had already ordered furniture, which was supposed to be delivered later that day. Most of it was simple—not fancy stuffed sofas and expensive wood tables and chairs—but he was excited to fill his own house with furniture that he had chosen.

He would let Lottie decorate the house as she wished once she arrived.

A month ago, after Kent had sent off his proposal, Lottie had immediately answered with a short letter of acceptance. She had also told him that her father had sold their farm and so Kent's letter was an answer to a prayer.

Kent immediately sent her enough money to travel across the

country. He'd also added a little more just in case Lottie needed any extra clothing.

They had exchanged two more letters after that, and Kent had thoroughly enjoyed both of them. In her last letter, Lottie had let him know that she had purchased a train ticket and planned to arrive in Green Valley by the end of June.

She spoke of her sadness of leaving her farm, but that she was looking forward to seeing his ranch, and meeting him. She wrote of how much she enjoyed working with her hands and looking at a job well done at the end of a long day.

Even though Kathy had encouraged him to place the ad and then answer Lottie's first letter, once he had made up his mind to bring Lottie to Nevada, his sister had sat him down before dinner one evening and they had a frank discussion.

Kathy wanted to make sure this was what Kent really wanted to do, to marry a woman he had never even met. He had immediately reassured Kathy, but every once in a while, her words made him rethink his decision.

He wasn't looking forward to letting his parents know what he was doing, but whenever he had any doubts about his decision, it only took him a few minutes to recognize that he felt good about bringing Lottie into his life.

He felt a presence behind him and knew Kathy was there. He turned around to greet his sister.

"It looks really good," Kathy said. "I'm sure Lottie will be happy with her new home." She grinned at him.

“I enjoyed working on it. Even though I know little about building a house, I helped when I could.”

He knew what Lottie meant, that it felt good to work with his hands. He loved that he was one step closer to having a successful ranch.

“Are you sure you don’t want to live with us?” Kent felt like he had to ask. “There’s plenty of room.”

“I’m actually excited for the small cottage we agreed on,” Kathy answered.

“The men will get started on it in a few days. It shouldn’t take long to get it built.” Especially because Kathy only wanted something about the same size as the old cabin, Kent thought but didn’t say.

“How are things going with the mine?” he asked instead.

She laughed, excitement dancing in her eyes. “I have to admit that running the mine isn’t as easy as I thought it would be, but I love being in charge of something that is doing well.”

Kent was aware of the many hours Kathy spent at the mine. Sometimes she worked alongside the men and Mr. Guthrie, and other times she spent the day doing finances and paperwork.

“I did wonder if you would change your mind about running the mine.” It was something he dreaded, that she would want to go back to Denver and Kent would need to try to run the mine and the ranch.

He would never voice those thoughts, though. Kathy needed to feel good about her decisions, just like he had the right to feel good

about his.

“No. The men who work for us are brutes, but Mr. Guthrie keeps them in line.”

Kent was glad Mr. Guthrie was working with Kathy. He was a rugged man who had spent several years in mines. His knowledge was invaluable and Kent felt better that Mr. Guthrie was around, keeping an eye on his sister.

“When is Lottie going to be here?” Kathy asked.

“I’m heading into Green Valley in a few hours to see if she has sent a new letter, but she should be arriving in Carlson City in a few days.”

“And then she’ll take the stagecoach to Green Valley?”

Kent nodded. “It should only take half a day for her to get here.”

“I’d like to come with you to Green Valley,” Kathy told him. “I have some things I’d like to pick up at the general store.”

A few hours later, the twins tied their horses to a post in front of the store. Kathy went inside and Kent headed to the post office.

He left the building a few minutes later with a telegram from Lottie, letting him know that she was going to arrive in two days’ time, as planned.

He also had his usual letter from his father, which he opened next. What he read made his heart drop.

The letter informed him that his father would be arriving next

week, and he included a list of everything he expected Kent to update him on.

Sighing, he went to find Kathy, who was standing outside the store talking to a young woman their age. She smiled in welcome when Kent joined her, and then quickly made introductions.

“Kent, this is Virginia Ferrell. Her husband is the pastor of Green Valley.”

Virginia nodded. “We’d heard that a brother and sister moved out to the land west of here. Welcome to Green Valley.”

“Thanks,” Kent answered.

He glanced at Kathy, wondering if she had told Virginia that Lottie was a mail-order bride. She seemed to understand his question and gave a slight shake of her head.

He breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He really didn’t want everyone to know of his plans.

“Kent is planning on getting married in a few days,” Kathy then spoke up and he tried not to groan.

Virginia’s face lit up. “Oh, how nice. I’m sure my husband, Daniel, will be happy to marry you whenever you are ready. Who is she?”

“She doesn’t live around here,” Kathy answered smoothly.

“I’ll pay a visit to your husband when I know more of our plans for the wedding,” Kent added.

Just then Kathy gave a gasp of surprise and Kent noticed that she

was looking beyond him toward the dusty street. He turned around and gave a gasp of his own.

Their parents were driving down the street in a fancy-looking buggy.

Kent held up the letter he had just read. "He said he was coming next week."

"I guess they decided to come early," Kathy said dryly and then she grinned. "We knew our peaceful time here couldn't last forever."

She ran toward the buggy eagerly, calling their names. The buggy stopped and Kent watched as Kathy said something and then pointed to him.

"Who are they?"

Kent jerked his attention to Virginia. "Our parents are arriving from Denver."

"How nice that they will be here for your wedding. Well, I need to get home. Enjoy your visit."

Virginia walked away and Kent stayed where he was, waiting for his father. Kathy joined him.

"Mother came," she said unnecessarily. "I'm not looking forward to the next few hours, but I have to admit that it is good to see them."

His father moved the buggy to the side of the street and then jumped out before helping his wife.

"You're early," Kent said and then cringed at the tone of his voice.

He didn't sound happy to see them, and he wondered if he should have been up front with his father about what they were doing.

"Your father wanted to see how well the mine is going," Mother answered. Kent moved to her side and gave her a hug. "He kept bringing up the subject and I finally suggested that we just come."

"I had a feeling we should come early," Father added. "And my intuition is usually correct."

"Mother, I'm sure you're tired from your travels. How about we go to that restaurant over there for lunch? We can talk there," Kathy suggested.

After finding a table and giving the waiter their orders, Father turned to Kent.

"Tell me what's going on. How is the mine? Your letters really haven't been all that informative."

Kent exchanged a glance with Kathy, suddenly glad they were in a public place for this conversation. His father tended to yell loudly when he was angry, but when he was around other people, he kept himself under control.

While they waited for their food, Kent began to explain exactly what they were doing. He talked about his plans for the ranch and what he had accomplished so far.

Kathy jumped in and told them how she had taken over the mine and, with Mr. Guthrie's help, it was doing well. Their food arrived and Kent noticed that Mother calmly began to eat while Father's face grew fierce and red with anger.

As Kent had expected, he didn't start yelling. But what he did say was almost as bad as if he had exploded in anger.

"You have just made the worst decision of your life. I should have known that I couldn't trust you to come here on your own."

He glared at Kent. "If you think that I am going to allow this to continue, you need to think again. I purchased the land specifically for the mine, not to have a lot of dirty, smelling animals on it."

He looked at Kathy and then back at Kent. "And you brought your sister into your scheme. I can't believe you're expecting her to do what you should be doing."

"Now, dear. Maybe now isn't the time to..." his mother began, but she stopped when Father turned his glare on her.

"Don't try to smooth things over, Mary. Even you should understand why I wanted this for Kent."

He looked at Kathy. "I agreed that you come here with your brother so that you could learn how to clean the cabin and cook for him, not work hard like a man."

Kent grew angry as their father attacked his sister. "Father!" he said loudly. Everyone in the restaurant looked toward them, which Kent hated, but it did make his father stop talking.

"At least come and let us show you what we've done. Yes, we've made some decisions that I know you aren't happy with. But maybe if you see what we have accomplished, you might understand."

He reached out and grasped Kathy's hand in an attempt to comfort

her. He could tell their father's words had deeply hurt her.

"That's an excellent idea, Kent," Mother spoke up as she buttered a large fluffy roll. "Dear, it's not good for your ulcer to get so upset.

"Let's enjoy our meal and then ride to the property. We can talk about this more in private."

Their father clearly wanted to keep lecturing them, but he gave his wife a short nod and began to eat. Kathy let out a sigh of relief.

Even though Kent wasn't at all hungry, he quickly finished his meal. He was grateful his mother had also come since she was the only one who could calm Father down.

As he took a last bite of potatoes, Kent remembered that he hadn't told his parents everything, although he wished that he could keep Lottie a secret for a while.

They didn't know she was arriving in a few days. He had really hoped he could have been married before Father arrived. Now, he was going to need to have another hard conversation with them.

Grant Golightly climbed into the buggy after helping his wife inside. He tried to calmly pick up the reins, but he was so upset with his children that his hands were shaking, and he had to purposefully force the tremors to stop before urging the horse forward.

He couldn't believe what his children were involved in. Didn't his son and daughter know that everything he did was to make their lives easier?

It didn't make a bit of sense to him that Kent was unwilling to run the mine. Why was he allowing Kathy to operate it for him? The entire situation was simply preposterous.

A smooth white hand covered his own. "I know you're upset, dear, but let's go see what Kent has been working on."

Grant glanced at his wife, knowing she was doing her best to be a peacemaker between father and son. This was something she had done regularly over the last few years.

Ever since Kent had turned twenty-one, they hadn't gotten along well, which deeply saddened Grant. He remembered the days when

Kent had so willingly followed him around as a young boy, eagerly listening to every word of counsel his father could give him.

Kent had loved Saturdays because that was when he didn't have to go to school and could spend the entire day with Grant in their stores. But all that had changed a few years ago.

Grant had to admit that he knew Kent wasn't happy whenever he tried to direct his son's life to his liking. Wasn't that what a good father was supposed to do for his only boy?

He cringed when he thought of his daughter working at the mine. Didn't she know how dangerous it was for a woman working among rough men? And Kent had actually allowed it?

She should be content to find a husband for herself and start a family. Maybe he should insist that she come back with them to Denver when it was time to leave.

His children were acting so strangely, he almost didn't recognize them.

Grant knew his wife, Mary, had supported his decision in purchasing the mine, but from the few comments she had made to him over the last few months, she clearly felt he needed to let Kent go his own way. Grant didn't agree.

"After all, that's what you did," she had gently reminded him one morning a few days after the ball when Kent had tried to tell them about his desire to run a cattle ranch. "You started your own business after planning for years to do so."

But Grant had ignored all of her comments and instead had gone full-fledged forward with his plans for Kent.

He was aware of why he felt so strongly about Kent's future. He had grown up with little money. His parents had died when he was a small boy and he had been raised in an orphanage in Chicago.

The care in the facility had been basic and he had left the moment he was old enough to fend for himself. He'd worked hard from the day he had left the orphanage, saving every penny he could.

Most orphans never had the opportunities he had. He had met a man, Mr. Joshua Barnes, who had owned many general stores.

Grant still remembered seeing the "Help Wanted" sign in the store window, forcing himself inside and praying desperately that the owner would give him a chance.

But Joshua had done more than that. He had hired Grant, and he also had welcomed him into his home. For the first time, Grant had seen what a real family was like.

Because of the training that he had received from Joshua, Grant now owned the largest home on the street where they lived in Denver. He also ran four general stores.

He had been able to provide his children with the life he'd wanted them to have. He never wanted his children to ever be in the position he had once been in, to not have money or a way to support themselves.

He was proud that he had been able to pull himself up to where he was now. He especially loved being among the elite of Denver, something he didn't think he'd ever have the opportunity to enjoy.

He just could not understand why his son would risk the fortune Grant was willing to provide to do something as ridiculous as

running a ranch.

He knew something Kent didn't—in the few years after he had left the orphanage, he had worked on a few ranches. He had absolutely hated the work and the type of people he had worked with.

In his mind, there were better opportunities in the world than working with cattle on the back of a horse all day long. A rancher's success was always subject to the weather.

If there was little rain one summer, the grass the cattle needed to eat didn't grow and the cattle died. If the winters were too cold, the cattle froze to death.

And cattle weren't the brightest animals. If one of them was spooked, they all would begin to run and would continue to do so even if it meant they dropped dead with exhaustion.

“Just promise me something,” Mary spoke up. “Allow Kent to show you what he's done, and listen to your daughter.”

Grant found himself giving a short nod; he could never deny his wife anything. But he knew he wasn't going to like what awaited them, and he was determined to do whatever was necessary to point his children in the right direction.

He knew what was best for them.

Lottie shifted on the hard train bench, trying to find a more comfortable position.

She had been riding on this train for almost a week—if she didn't get a chance to stretch her legs soon, she was going to go crazy. She couldn't think of the last time she had been so inactive.

She was shocked by how slow the train moved on the tracks. There were times she was sure she could walk faster.

It also seemed like there were large stones on the railroad tracks and the train hit everyone of them, jerking her back and forth on the bench. She wondered if she would end up with a dark bruise on the shoulder that kept hitting the side of the train.

When the train conductor had last made his rounds, she had asked him how much longer until they arrived in Carlson City. He had told her they would arrive in a few hours, but to Lottie, that might as well have been all day.

To keep her mind occupied, she tugged her carpetbag close to her and pulled out the letters Kent had sent. Even though she had read them several times, she began to read through them again.

Nerves danced in her stomach, and she wondered for what felt like the millionth time if she was making the right decision.

She had gone back and forth so many times, whether she should be making this decision to travel across the country to marry a man she had never met. But each time she read through his letters, she felt a calming peace flood through her, and she knew she was making the right choice.

Setting the last letter aside, she leaned her head against the train bench in an attempt to get some rest. But instead her mind went over the last time she had seen her father and her childhood home.

““I'm going to miss you,” she'd said to him.

Though she still felt angry about the choices he was forcing her to make, she knew deep in her heart that she would likely never see him again. She was going to lose her entire family in a matter of months.

“I hope you will be happy living in Aston.”

Her father accepted her hug but then moved stiffly away, which didn't surprise Lottie. Pa had never been a man who liked affection.

“I'm sure I will. I've been able to find a job.”

“That's great,” Lottie said with relief. That he had no way to support himself had worried her a bit. He hadn't been able to sell the farm for the amount he'd wanted. “Where are you working?”

“Mr. Hanson hired me.”

Something twisted inside of her at those words as she remembered that she had gone to Mr. Hanson when she was looking for work weeks ago, and he'd refused to hire her because she was a woman.

"I hope it will work out for you," was all she could think of to say, doing her best to push anger and regrets away. "When is the new owner of the farm moving in?"

"Next week sometime," her father responded. "He just has to give me the last payment. I have a neighbor boy coming over to take care of the animals until he gets here."

After giving her father one last hug, Lottie had boarded the train, purposely choosing a bench facing away from where her father was standing. If she could see him through the window, she knew she would likely get off.

Now, almost a week later, Lottie could hardly believe she was actually heading west for the sole purpose of getting married to a stranger she'd never met. If someone had told her a year ago that this was something she would be doing, she would've thought that person was crazy.

She still couldn't quite comprehend how her life had led her to this point because of the many changes she had been dealing with. But she was determined to move forward.

She had actually enjoyed the first few days on the train. She'd loved watching the different cities and towns pass by.

Daily, the scenery and landscape changed drastically, going from green hills with large cities to smaller ones on the flat plains of the Midwest.

As the train traveled through Kansas, she was glad she wasn't stopping there. She didn't think she could enjoy living on land that seemed to go on for miles with nothing on the horizon.

She was used to green trees and the scent of the nearby Atlantic Ocean. A few times a year, she had gone to the ocean with her family and had always loved those trips.

They would collect a bucket of clams and make chowder. She was heartbroken to realize she would likely never see the Atlantic Ocean again. There were so many new changes in her life.

Kent had sent her enough money to not only travel to Nevada, but also for food. She'd even had a little bit extra to purchase a nice traveling dress.

The food had been adequate at first but now tasted bland. She only ate to keep up her strength, not because she enjoyed the dry bread and greasy meat that was provided.

It was also very difficult for her to pay an entire dollar for a meal she could have made at home for a fraction of the cost.

As the train moved slowly, questions filtered through her mind almost constantly. Would Kent like her? What about his family?

He had mentioned in one of his letters that he had a twin sister. Would his sister like her? He hadn't said anything about his parents and she wondered if they were no longer alive.

If that was the case, this would be another thing that they would have in common. After leaving her father in Maine, and the loss of her sister and mother, Kent was going to be all Lottie had.

When the train finally pulled into Carlson City, she made sure she was one of the first passengers off. After asking for directions to the nearest stagecoach station and making arrangements for her trunk to be taken there, she walked down the street.

Part of her wished she could stay the night in a hotel—she could take a bath and change into a clean dress.

But she had already sent a telegram to Kent to say she would be arriving in Green Valley that evening. Staying in a hotel would make it so she wouldn't get there until tomorrow.

She had also discovered that if she had waited to travel to Nevada for a few weeks, she could have ridden the train all the way to Green Valley.

When the porter found out she was heading to the small town, he had informed her that the tracks were completed, they were only waiting for the finishing touches to be done on the station itself.

While part of her wished she had known that fact, she was glad she would soon be in Green Valley, even if it was going to take an extra half-day to get there.

Less than an hour later, she was on the stagecoach with two other passengers, an older couple. On the train, Lottie had done her best to avoid bringing attention to herself, and so she had interacted very little with the other people.

Now, as they traveled on the bumpy road toward Green Valley in the small stagecoach, she realized she would need to talk to them even though she would likely never meet this couple again.

“Since we are going to be spending the next few hours together, we

might as well get to know each other,” the woman said. “I’m Julie Holland and this is my husband, George.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Charlotte Pelletier. Is your final destination Green Valley, or are you traveling farther?” she asked, hoping she could encourage the older woman to talk about herself instead of asking personal questions of Lottie.

“We will stay in Green Valley for an evening, but we’re actually heading to San Francisco. Our oldest daughter is having her third child, and we are going to spend the summer there helping out.”

Mr. Holland snorted. “More like taking over,” he muttered.

Mrs. Holland patted her husband's knee.

“Now, you know that Elizabeth is very happy that we’re coming. Besides, we can also spend time helping with the other children. It’s been almost a year since we’ve seen them.”

Mr. Holland shook his head, but his eyes were twinkling, letting Lottie know that he wasn’t as grouchy as he pretended to be.

Over the next hour, Mrs. Holland talked about Elizabeth and her advanced stage of pregnancy, which made Lottie feel a bit uncomfortable. She had never had a woman be so frank and open with her about pregnancy before, especially one who was a stranger.

Mrs. Holland also told Lottie all about their other children, then about the town they lived in and how George used to be the mayor until he finally agreed to retire. Lottie quickly learned that Mrs. Holland loved to talk and she kept their conversation going, which didn't bother Lottie.

Lottie hadn't needed to feel pressured to talk about herself. She had learned quickly in the early part of her travels to not tell anyone that she was planning on marrying a man she had never met.

A few women had thought the idea was fun and daring, but others immediately began to treat her almost like a prostitute.

When the stagecoach finally pulled into Green Valley, Lottie was relieved, although she had to admit that the last few hours had passed quickly as she'd listened to Mrs. Holland chatter about her family and life.

As Lottie stepped off the stagecoach, her heart began to beat hard in her chest and she looked around for the likely man who would be her fiancé. The sun shone brightly in her eyes, and then there he was.

A man was standing near the stagecoach station, leaning against the wall. She couldn't see his face because of a cowboy hat that cast a dark shadow. Then, he began to walk toward her.

She suddenly felt like she couldn't breathe. He had to be the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on.

When he took off his hat, the first thing she saw was that he had eyes as blue as the western sky.

Kent couldn't believe his eyes when he saw his future wife

step out of the stagecoach. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

Although her blond hair and brown dress certainly were not up to his family's standards, he was instantly drawn to her.

He could tell she was tired from her travels; the dress she wore was dirty and wrinkled. The hat perched on her head looked like it would blow away in the first stiff wind.

He knew she was aware of who he was the moment their eyes met. She began to move toward him, her eyes full of curiosity and determination.

His upbringing kicked in and he quickly moved to her side.

"Are you Lottie?" he asked unnecessarily and she nodded. It seemed for a moment that time stopped as they looked at each other. He forced himself to speak. "I'm Kent Golightly."

"It's nice to meet you," Lottie replied as a smile spread across her face.

Just then, the stagecoach driver dropped a medium-sized trunk on the ground nearby. "Is this yours?"

Lottie nodded.

"I have a wagon over there." Kent pointed as he easily lifted the trunk. "Let me carry this over and then I'll get the rest of your luggage."

Lottie's face colored. "That trunk is all I have, besides this bag." She held up a small carpet bag that looked like it was about ready to fall apart.

Kent was a bit surprised she hadn't packed more than one trunk, and he had to remind himself that she wasn't from a well-to-do family. She probably hadn't had a closet full of dresses, shoes, and wraps.

He thought of the many trips he had taken with his mother and sister and the multiple trunks and bags they had between them. Maybe he would need to ask Kathy to take her shopping in the next few days.

"Well, we can head out to the ranch now, then," Kent said. After setting her trunk into the back of the wagon, he helped her onto the bench.

He urged the horses to move down the street and soon they were beyond the boundaries of the town. Lottie didn't say a word for the first few minutes as she looked with intense interest at their surroundings.

"Tell me about Green Valley," Lottie invited. "This town looks so different from Aston. It's much smaller, for one thing."

"I haven't been here long, but I already love the town. Only a few hundred people live here, but everyone is friendly and kind."

"I can't believe how big the mountains are, and how rugged they look," Lottie commented.

"After you're settled in, I'll take you to them," Kent offered. "The mine my family owns sits at the base of those mountains over there." He pointed in the right direction.

"That will be nice. Tell me more about your ranch."

He explained to her what he'd been doing on the ranch and how the house was almost completed. As they rode down the dirt road, he noticed Lottie seemed to know a lot about plants and trees.

She pointed to one and commented that Maine had the same plant. If there was something she didn't recognize, she asked if he knew the name.

Kent had to admit that he had never wondered about the names of the plants and trees around them. In his mind, they were there, and they did their part in making this part of Nevada a beautiful spot—and that was where his interest in them ended.

As they talked, Kent was able to see firsthand Lottie's fiery and nontraditional personality. He had seen this in the letters that they had exchanged, but it was refreshing to see she was the same in person.

To him, it was a delight to see her love of life. He looked forward to getting to know her better and spending the rest of their lives together.

Part of him hoped his parents weren't waiting for him at the ranch. His father had mentioned that he wanted to spend the day at the mine and Kathy had been thrilled for the opportunity to show him what she had been doing.

Kent hadn't had a chance to tell them that he was getting married, or where his future bride was from.

No, that wasn't correct. He'd had plenty of chances, he just didn't want to deal with the obvious family conflict that would arise once his parents knew of Lottie's existence.

What he really wanted was to have some time on his own to show Lottie the house he'd built for her, and the rest of the ranch. Still, he knew he had better tell her what was going on in his family when she asked her next question.

"So, when will the wedding be held?"

"I'm sorry. That's the first thing that I should have told you," Kent said with regret in his voice. "I spoke with the pastor of Green Valley just before you arrived.

"He's willing to perform the wedding as soon as we're ready. I thought you might want to rest for a day or two before getting ready for the wedding. I'm sure you're exhausted."

"A night to sleep as long as I need to sounds nice, but I don't mind getting married as soon as it can be arranged," Lottie answered.

"I'll send word to him that we'll plan to get married tomorrow, then." He took a deep breath. "I do have something to tell you."

Lottie looked at him with curiosity but also with a bit of fear in her

eyes, as if she knew what she was going to hear wasn't going to be good. He quickly explained about his parents showing up earlier than expected.

"I don't mind if your parents attend the wedding. In fact, I'm looking forward to meeting them, and your sister." Sadness flooded her face for a moment and then quickly disappeared.

Kent knew she had lost two family members only a few months ago and he reached out to squeeze her hand in sympathy. He expected her to give him a small smile at his touch and then pull her hand away like a proper society lady would have, but instead she squeezed back fiercely.

Her grip on his hand was almost as strong as what a man's would be. He could feel calluses on her hand, a distinct reminder that he wasn't marrying a socialite with lily-white hands who was afraid to get dirty, but a woman who actually wanted to work on the ranch with him.

Just then she gasped as the wagon crested a small hill and beautiful scenery opened up in front of them. "Is this your ranch?" she asked with delight.

Kent grinned. "Yes, it is."

"All of it?"

He quickly pointed out the boundaries.

"It is beautiful, much more than I had imagined," she half-whispered as she looked around. He noticed that she kept her hand in his, which he didn't mind a bit.

He had wondered what her first reaction would be to his land, her new home, and he wasn't disappointed. She stared at her surroundings almost as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"It's so large. My farm was much smaller than this. From what I can tell, we could put four farms the size of what mine was, maybe more, on this land. I've never had to take care of so much."

"I haven't either, so I guess we can learn together. The house is over there, but first—"

Kent didn't get a chance to finish what he wanted to say because the screen door opened and his mother stepped outside. His father and Kathy joined her a moment later.

The opportunity to warn Lottie of what she was getting into with his parents had passed. Again, he had avoided a necessary conversation because he didn't want the conflict that might entail.

He could only hope that Lottie would forgive him for how his parents might treat her, only because she wasn't what they would have chosen for him.

Lottie sat in a daze while Kent guided the wagon near a shade tree before jumping out. He held out his hand and helped her down.

She tried to remember exactly what Kent had just said. Had he just admitted that he hadn't taken care of so much land before now? What did he mean by that?

Thinking back to what he had written to her in his letters about the ranch, she suddenly realized that it hadn't been much. She had just assumed that since he owned so much land, he knew what he was doing.

His ad had mentioned that he was looking for a woman who wasn't afraid of hard work, but now she wondered exactly what he was expecting of her.

As those thoughts ran through her mind, she focused on his family, who stood on the porch.

An older man crossed his arms, a fierce frown on his face. He had on a fancy suit, even though it was a hot summer day. His hair had been combed and a bowler hat sat on his head.

An older woman tucked her arm through his and patted it, as if sending him an unspoken message. Her light blue gown looked so nice, Lottie would have thought she was on her way to a fancy event. Her hair was pulled back with not a strand out of place.

A woman about her age smiled with delight and flew down the steps toward them. Her light summer dress wasn't as nice as her mother's, but still much nicer than the dresses Lottie owned.

"You're here," the young woman said as she swept Lottie into a welcoming hug.

Lottie knew without Kent saying anything that this was Kathy. While she wasn't used to such displays of greeting, Lottie immediately liked her.

Kent took Lottie's arm and gently guided her toward his parents.

"Mother, Father, I would like you to meet Lottie Pelletier. Lottie, these are my parents, and the woman who just attacked you is my twin sister, Kathy." His eyes twinkled as he said those words and Lottie could tell he was very close to his sister.

Mrs. Golightly smiled formally but her eyes were a bit cold. "Welcome, Miss Pelletier. It is nice to meet you."

Lottie relaxed a bit. "Thank you." Remembering that Kathy had given her a welcoming hug, she put her arms around Mrs. Golightly, who instantly stiffened. Lottie knew she had made a mistake.

"I guess country folks like me have a different way of greeting each other," she said, doing her best to keep a smile on her face as she stepped away from the older woman.

“Where are you from?” Mr. Golightly demanded, the frown on his face growing deeper.

Kent immediately moved to her side, and Lottie had to force herself to not lean against him for support. She needed to let this man know she wasn’t the type to be pushed around.

“From Ashton, Maine.”

“What are you doing clear out here?” Mr. Golightly asked with suspicion.

Before Lottie could answer, Kent held up a hand. “Father, let’s go inside the house and get out of this hot sun. Lottie has been traveling a long time and I’d like to give her a chance to rest.”

Mr. Golightly’s lips shut tightly, but he nodded and, as a group, they all moved inside.

Lottie was immediately interested in what the house looked like, knowing that this was where she would be living after the wedding, and most likely for the rest of her life. But she didn’t get much of a chance to look around.

Kent’s family members went into a room Lottie assumed was a parlor, but he held back. “If you would like, I can show you to a room, if you want to rest.”

Lottie did feel very tired. She hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep since she left Maine, but she needed to be part of whatever was going to happen with Kent and his family.

She needed to know exactly what she was getting herself into.

"I'm fine," she answered and then walked into the parlor and took a seat. Kent sat next to her.

As she sat, a small cloud of dust flew up around her, reminding her how disheveled she probably looked. Maybe she should have at least changed her dress, but it was too late now.

She did see a look of disgust from Mr. Golightly as the dust settled. For some reason, this man did not like her.

As Kent began to talk, she discreetly studied each of Kent's family members. She'd had no idea that his family would be so well-to-do and high society and she began to feel very uncomfortable.

"What do you mean, you're going to marry this woman?"

Lottie's attention went from studying Kent's family to listening to exactly what was going on.

"You heard me, Father. Lottie and I have been writing over the last few months.

"She has agreed to come out and marry me. She was raised on a farm and is willing to help me on the ranch," Kent explained.

Lottie's eyes jerked to his, shock spread throughout her body. It sounded like his family hadn't known a thing about her.

She had an awful feeling that she had just gotten herself into a big ugly mess.

Lottie woke up with the sun shining through the open curtains in

her room. She could tell the sun had been up for quite some time.

She felt a bit guilty for sleeping so long, but she also remembered Kent's last words to her the night before.

"Sleep as long as you need to. We'll talk in the morning."

Lottie smiled as she thought of Kent. She had really lucked out in the man she was choosing to marry. He was so handsome and kind.

Then she remembered the awful conversation she had witnessed the day before between Kent and his father. Kent had done his best to explain why Lottie was in his life and why he had chosen her to be his wife, but Mr. Golightly was having none of it.

"What in the world are you even thinking, Kent?" Mr. Golightly had yelled at one point. "I could have given you a wonderful life of luxury and instead you chose to run a cattle ranch.

"You could have chosen any woman in Denver to be your wife. Instead you chose..." He didn't finish his sentence but glared at Lottie as if she had somehow bewitched Kent into doing what she wished.

"Now, my dear," Mrs. Golightly had said, in an obvious effort to smooth things over, and Mr. Golightly had turned on her.

"Don't 'my dear' me. I won't stand for this. Do you hear me? I won't." He turned to Kent and shook a fist in the air. "You are still my son and my heir. I can demand that you do as I wish or I will cut you off without a cent."

Kent had stood up at this point, doing his best to get his father to

just listen to him. No one noticed that Lottie suddenly had gotten dizzy and faint. She had slumped into her chair.

She didn't remember anything after that, until she woke up laying on a bed, a window nearby open and a cool breeze blowing on her. Kathy was bent over her, trying to remove her traveling dress.

"Good. You're awake. Help me get this heavy dress off you," she had said.

Lottie had stood up slowly and soon the dress hung over a nearby chair. She immediately laid down again, still feeling faint.

"I'm not a bit surprised that you fainted in such a hot dress." Kathy made a tsking noise as she handed a glass of water to Lottie. "Drink this and then get some rest."

Lottie had done as Kathy suggested and then immediately fell asleep. She only woke up once and saw that Kent was sitting in a chair near her bed.

He had made sure she was feeling okay and then told her to go back to sleep.

Now, she wondered what was going to happen that day. Was she going to be getting married, or had Kent's father been able to convince him that it wasn't in his best interest to marry her?

If that happened, what was she going to do?

She thought of how she had fainted right in front of Kent and his family. She was embarrassed that she had done so. She had never fainted in her life and she was sure his father was going to take this as a sign that she wasn't strong enough to help Kent around

the ranch.

Part of her wanted to stay in this room and never leave, and she gave a harsh laugh at the thought. Besides the fact that she desperately needed to find the outhouse, she was extremely hungry.

And she had never in her life avoided a situation that needed to be addressed head-on.

With a determined nod, she got up and was glad to see that she no longer felt dizzy. She saw her trunk leaning against a wall and was quickly able to find a dress to wear.

Although it was wrinkled, at least it was clean.

She stepped out of the bedroom and was pleased to find that the house had a bathroom. After using it, she made her way downstairs.

It only took her a few moments to find the kitchen, and she was glad to see that no one was there. But there was a plate in the middle of the table that had two large biscuits, an apple, and a small container of jam. She immediately helped herself.

After filling her stomach, she was feeling much better and wondered where everyone was. She was torn between wanting to explore this wonderful house or to go and find Kent.

She finally stepped outside, knowing that she needed to have a very frank conversation with her future husband. Regardless of how his father felt about her, she needed to find out exactly why he had kept so many things from her, and from his family.

The moment the screen door shut behind her, she stood on the porch and allowed herself to enjoy the view in front of her. Kent's land was the most beautiful she had ever seen.

She would always miss Maine; it was her childhood home, after all. But living here, so close to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, would more than make up for not seeing the Atlantic Ocean again or eating a decent bowl of clam chowder.

From what she could see of the sun, it was mid-morning. Green grass grew all over. A meadow behind the house was full of colorful wildflowers, and small animals like rabbits and squirrels enjoyed running through them.

Noticing a half-finished barn a short distance away, she began to walk in that direction, trying to take everything in. Even further away was a large herd of cattle calmly cropping grass or laying under a few shade trees, chewing their cud.

A side stream meandered through the tall grass and she bent to touch the water, gasping with delight at how cold it was. She bent down to scoop a handful of the water in her mouth when she heard someone behind her.

"Good morning."

Lottie quickly stood up and turned around, drying her hand on her dress. Kent stood there, an intent expression in his eyes as he looked her over.

"Hello," she answered.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

She nodded and waved her hand at her surroundings. "This... it's just so beautiful."

A wide smile spread across his face at her words. "I'm glad you think so. I feel the same."

For a long moment, they stood and looked at each other. Lottie had a strong urge to reach out and hold his hand. She still could feel her hand in his from when they had traveled from Green Valley to the ranch the day before, and she had enjoyed every moment of it.

She took a small step back to keep herself from reaching out to him.

"We need to talk," they both said at the same time.

Lottie began to laugh, which made Kent seem to relax.

"How are you feeling this morning? I hope you got enough sleep," Kent said.

"I did, and I do feel better. I'm really sorry that I—" Lottie started to say.

"Don't apologize. I feel bad that I didn't make sure your needs were met. I know how exhausting traveling can be," Kent assured her.

"I should have made sure you had gotten something to eat the moment we arrived. And speaking of food, there are some biscuits left from breakfast on the table. Did you get something to eat?"

Lottie nodded. "I did, thank you. I thought I'd look around the ranch. Can you show me around?"

“I’d be happy to,” Kent said, looking pleased with her request.

His arm moved toward her, as if he was going to take her hand, but then he moved away. She felt a distinct disappointment that he hadn’t reached out to her, but she reminded herself that they had just met the day before.

It was going to take time for the two of them to get to know each other.

They walked slowly toward the barn and she listened silently as Kent described all that he had accomplished since he moved here. Fences were being built, and there were about one hundred cattle in the farthest field from the house.

From what she could see, almost the entire area was covered with grass and shrubs, but most of the plants were beginning to turn brown in the hot sun.

As beautiful as this area was, it wasn’t green like Maine. What was he going to do when the grass was no longer edible?

She took a stick and dug into the dirt. It was quite dry, nothing like the dark, moist ground she was used to. She hoped there was better soil somewhere on this property.

The barn was almost done, and she was impressed with Kent’s plans for it. The building was almost as large as the house, with ten stalls for horses and an area reserved for sick cattle.

A cat scurried outside when she looked in the barn, and Kent told her that the animal had shown up a few days ago and made herself at home.

Kent talked about building a corral near the barn. He showed her a small chicken coop that had about ten hens inside. A field next to them held a dairy cow, which Kent claimed gave good milk.

“You’ve only been here for a few months?” Lottie asked. “You’ve gotten so much done.” She looked at the newly built house, barn, and fences.

“Yes. I’ve had a lot of help,” Kent explained.

Lottie knew he meant he had access to a lot of money, so he could hire whomever he wished to help build the house and the barn.

Part of her had to wonder what she could have done with her family’s farm in Maine if she had a bank account full of money at her disposal. She could have rebuilt the barn, fixed the rotting fence posts, replaced the rusted wire with new. She could have...

No, she could no longer think of the past, and what-ifs. There hadn’t been money available to keep the farm going, and besides, she doubted her father would have stayed even if there had been.

He had seemed pretty determined to move on. And he hadn’t been willing to let her inherit the property.

Now, she was in Nevada. Being here was her choice, and she was pleased with her new home.

“I did want to apologize for my parents’ reaction to you,” Kent said. Lottie was glad he’d brought up the subject that had hovered in the back of her mind while they had walked around.

“I’m sure it was a shock for them to find out that you agreed to marry me,” Lottie answered. “It’s obvious I was not raised to the

standards you were. I just wish they had known about me before I arrived.”

“I know I should have told them, but they only arrived from Denver yesterday afternoon. Father was... upset about some other things, and I never got a chance to tell them about you,” Kent explained.

Lottie wanted to ask Kent what his father was upset about, but before she could question him, he continued.

“I’m sure it will take some time for them to get used to our marriage, but please know that I do still want to marry you.”

Lottie stopped walking and studied him. “I want to marry you, too,” she found herself saying.

He looked at her in relief. “I knew the moment you stepped out of the stagecoach that we will be good for each other.

“As far as my parents are concerned, I’m afraid you’re going to need to develop a thick skin around them. But they will learn to accept you, the more they’re able to get to know you.”

Lottie wasn’t sure if that would ever happen, but she didn’t want to contradict him.

She only nodded. “I came to Green Valley to marry you, not try to please your parents. I’m sure it will all work out.”

Besides, once the wedding was over, she was sure Grant and Mary would travel back to Denver. It was obvious they didn’t like it here.

By this time, they were near the house and Kent changed the subject. "You didn't get a chance to see inside the house. Would you like me to show you around?"

"That would be nice," Lottie responded eagerly. "The little I did see, I liked."

They went inside the kitchen, and Kent proudly pointed out the large pantry full of containers of dried food, flour, sugar, coffee, and spices. Wooden cupboards held a set of plates and glasses, and cast iron pans hung on a wall beside the stove.

The wooden floor was sanded smoothly, with a large colorful braided rug in the middle of the room. Beside the parlor was a small room off the kitchen that Kent said would be for a housekeeper, and another room he said he'd be using as an office.

Lottie had already seen what was on the second floor but she allowed Kent to lead her up the stairs. He showed her the room he was using.

It was larger than the one she'd spent the night in. In fact, the room she had shared with Ellen in Maine would fit into this one at least three times.

He was showing her the closet and what drawers she could use for her clothes when someone called Kent's name. She recognized Mary's high-pitched voice.

Lottie and Kent both looked toward the open doorway, and she knew her time with him was at an end, at least for now. She still wanted to talk to him about a few other concerns, but any serious conversation was going to have to wait.

Kent moved out into the hallway where Mary was standing. “What do you need, Mother?”

“Your father is looking for you. He wants to talk to you about the mine.”

Kent frowned, but he nodded. “We’ll have to finish this tour later.”

“It’s fine,” Lottie reassured him. “Besides, there are some things I need to do, too.”

He looked at her for a long moment and then headed down the stairs. Lottie hoped Mary would follow him, but she stayed where she was.

“You shouldn’t be in a bedroom alone with Kent,” she said with a frown. “I don’t know what things are like where you are from, but it just isn’t... seemly for a young woman to be alone with a man she isn’t married to.”

Lottie tried not to show her frustration. What did Mary think they had been doing? The door was wide open, and besides, they were getting married in a few hours.

Biting her tongue to keep herself from saying something she might later regret, she slipped past Mary and walked into the guest room. She shut the door behind her, hoping the older woman wouldn’t try to follow her inside.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Mary’s light footsteps going down the stairs.

She went to her open trunk and carefully removed her clothing. She only had two dresses, besides the one she now wore. She laid

them out on the bed and tried not to cringe at their appearance.

The fabric was faded and the hems thin. One of the dresses had been Ellen's. Her sister had been shorter than her, so while the dress would fit Lottie in the bodice, the bottom would be a few inches too short.

She removed the underthings she'd brought and wondered if she should put the clothes in Kent's room now, or if she should wait until after the ceremony. Thinking about the upcoming wedding, she sank onto the bed.

In the excitement of seeing the ranch and her new home, she had forgotten to ask Kent what the plans were for today. Was the ceremony going to happen as scheduled, or would something happen to postpone it?

Lottie stayed in the room until the sun was high in the sky.

Her stomach growled, letting her know that it was lunchtime, and she hadn't had much to eat for breakfast.

Suddenly hating the fact that she felt like she needed to hide in the guest room, she opened the door and went down to the kitchen. After looking through the pantry, she found a fresh loaf of bread and sliced it up.

There was a small piece of cooked beef wrapped in a thin piece of cloth and placed in a clay container to keep cool. She used that to make sandwiches.

A quick search of the house told her that her husband was in his office with his father, and she was curious as to how things were going. She could hear the men talking, but not what they were saying.

A few minutes later, Kent entered the kitchen and smiled when he saw her.

"I made sandwiches," Lottie said as she pointed to the plate she'd placed them on. "I also sliced apples and carrots. I'm not sure what

else you'd like for lunch."

"This looks great," Kent said eagerly. "I'll get my parents."

A few minutes later, the four of them sat around the table. Did Mary and Grant even want beef sandwiches?

She was sure the type of food they ate was much fancier than this, but they filled their plates with the food Lottie had fixed without comment. Lottie enjoyed her sandwich while Kent and Grant continued to talk about the mine.

From some of the things Grant said, he seemed to expect Kent to run the mine instead of the ranch, which was a bit confusing. Was it possible for Kent to do both?

"Where is your sister?" Lottie asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

Kent glanced at Grant before answering. "She's in her office taking care of payroll for the miners."

"She's doing the job you should be doing," Grant retorted. "And I don't like that she's living in that old cabin on her own. She should be here, with us."

"Kathy is where she wants to be," Kent said, an edge to his voice.

"What cabin?" Lottie questioned as she tried to remember if she had seen one that morning while walking around the ranch.

"I wasn't able to show you where the mine is, but it's in the mountains at the other end of my property," Kent explained. "A small cabin near there is where Kathy is living for the time being."

This was the first time Lottie had even heard that there was a mine nearby. How many more surprises were there going to be? What did that have to do with running a ranch?

Before she could ask the questions that tumbled in her mind, Kent turned to Lottie. "I haven't told you what the plans are for the wedding."

"I was wondering about that," Lottie admitted, allowing the change in conversation, for now.

"Don't you think you should wait a week or so?" Mary spoke up. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Why would we want to wait?" Kent asked. "Getting married is the reason Lottie came here, after all."

"To make sure this is what you both want. After all, neither of you even met until yesterday and—"

"Mother, we have already made our decision," Kent said firmly. "Lottie, I have made arrangements for the pastor of Green Valley, Mr. Ferrell, to come out here at two o'clock."

"He will perform the ceremony in the parlor—that is, if you are still agreeable." He paused for a moment. "If you'd rather marry in the church, I can make arrangements for that."

"The parlor will be fine," Lottie said with relief. He wasn't going to change his mind.

Part of her had expected the wedding to be a large event, even if it was being held at the last minute, since it was obvious that this family knew many people in town.

Since the wedding was to be held in the parlor, only a few people could attend. She was glad it would be a small, intimate ceremony.

"I'll be ready at two o'clock," she added.

"I do have something to say," Mary spoke up. "What is your full name?"

"Charlotte Evelyn Pelletier."

"Then why are you being called Lottie? Charlotte is a much better, more suitable name." Mary gave a decisive nod. "That is what you will be called."

Again, Lottie felt intimidated, but she needed to put a stop to the control Kent's mother seemed to have over everyone, and was trying to have with her.

"I have never liked Charlotte. I want to be called Lottie."

She didn't say the reason why; that her mother had called her that since she was a small girl, another way to remember her by.

Mary frowned and started to speak, but Kent cut her off.

"If she wants to be called Lottie, then that is what we'll do," he said firmly.

Lottie gave him a small smile and glanced at her half-eaten sandwich. She had been hungry a few minutes ago, but now, she just wanted to get this meal over with.

After lunch, Lottie quickly tidied the kitchen while Kent convinced his father to see what he had planned for his ranch. Mary didn't

leave the table and watched Lottie work without saying a word.

Lottie wondered what she was thinking but didn't ask, sure she didn't want to know. When she put the last dish away, Mary finally spoke.

"Why don't we go to the guest room? I can help you get ready for the wedding," she suggested.

Lottie was actually thrilled that Mary had offered. While her conversation with Kent had gone as well as could be expected, she still was nervous about the idea of marrying into a family where some of the members weren't happy about the event.

Although she should have expected that. What parent would want their adult son to marry a woman he had never met until a few days ago?

Because she was a mail-order bride, they likely thought she was desperate, willing to marry anyone just to get out of a bad situation.

Although that was mostly true, she could have started a new life for herself in a larger city than Aston if she had desired it. But if she had gone that direction, she would've hated it, mainly because the only jobs she would be able to find would be in a factory.

The idea of spending her days in a dark, stuffy building depressed her. She had already tried that once, and had lost her mother and sister in the process.

The fact that Mary was offering to help her dress made Lottie wonder if Mary was doing her best to accept Lottie's presence in her son's life.

“I would like that,” Lottie responded.

Mary led the way to the room Lottie had used the night before. The moment she stepped inside the room, Mary shut the door firmly behind her and looked her over critically up and down.

Lottie took a step back, feeling like she was an insect under Mary's sharp gaze.

“I'm assuming you don't have a proper dress to wear, so we'll just have to work with what you have,” Mary said curtly.

Lottie brightened. “I did bring something to wear. Let me show you.”

She opened her trunk and pulled out a beautiful dress that she had left on the bottom. It was quite wrinkled from being in the trunk for so many days, but she held it up in front of her proudly.

“This is the dress my mother wore for her wedding. Pa gave it to me.”

She looked down at the dress as she spoke, doing her best to smooth the wrinkles out. The fabric was light blue, almost white. Small beads covered the bodice, and lace trimmed the collar and sleeves.

She was thrilled that her father had given her this dress. She had planned to wear another one, a mauve dress that she always wore to church.

It would have been adequate, but she loved the idea of wearing her mother's wedding dress for her own marriage. It made her feel like her mother would be there, supporting her in her decision to start

this new life with Kent.

“I’m sure it won’t take long to iron it. Once the wrinkles are out, it will look as good as new,” Lottie added.

It was then that she glanced up and saw Mary’s expression of disgust. “Don’t you have something else? That dress would only be fine for a wedding in the country.”

Lottie laughed, trying to push the hurtful words away. It occurred to her that she was always going to be hearing comments like this—she needed to grow a thick skin, like Kent had suggested, if she was going to make this marriage work.

“We are in the country,” she pointed out.

Mary looked like she wanted to say something else, but Lottie was relieved when she finally gave a short nod. “We don’t have a maid to iron your dress.”

Lottie smiled. “Well, it’s a good thing that I know how to iron, isn’t it?”

Clutching the dress in front of her, she left the room and walked downstairs into the kitchen. She found two irons easily and set them both on the wood stove to heat up.

She was thrilled that Kent had two irons, something she hadn’t had in Maine. While one iron heated on the stove, she could use the other one to press the wrinkles out of the dress. When it cooled, she could switch.

While they were warming, she filled a small bowl with water and then placed a layer of thick towels on the table. Because she had

two irons to work with, it didn't take her long to sprinkle water on the dress and press out the wrinkles.

When she was done, the dress looked like it had when it hung in the back of her mother's closet in Maine. Again, she wished her mother and Ellen could be with her, and tears threatened to fall.

If her father had been there, he would walk her down the aisle. She pushed the tears back with determination. She wasn't going to cry on her wedding day.

Yes, her mother and sister were gone, and her father had essentially abandoned her, but she was forming a new family with Kent. It was time for her to put her past aside and focus on her future.

Holding the dress carefully in her arms, she returned to her room. Surprisingly, Mary was still there, waiting for her as she sat in a wooden chair.

Part of Lottie wished she could just get ready for the wedding on her own, but since the dress had buttons going up the back of it, she knew she was going to need some help.

Lottie took off the dress she had put on that morning and allowed Mary to help her into the wedding gown. Once the last button was done up, Mary stood back and looked at her critically.

Lottie was a bit uncomfortable in the dress. It was a little tight through the bodice and at least two inches too short.

But as long as she didn't take a deep breath, it should be fine wearing the dress for a few hours. There was a small mirror on the wall, and she looked at herself.

“It does look nice on you,” Mary commented, although Lottie could tell she would rather have Lottie wear something else.

At least she’s trying to be nice, she thought.

“Although it is a little bit tight. I’m sure that’s because you’re so muscular from working outside. And since you’re so tanned, the color of the dress is making you look a bit yellow. But it will do.”

Lottie didn’t say anything and bit her tongue to keep herself from saying something hurtful back. She was not going to let this woman know how upsetting her words were.

It didn’t matter what Mary thought. This was Lottie’s wedding day, and she was going to enjoy it.

“I like the dress,” she said.

“Let me do your hair for you,” Mary offered.

She sat down silently as Mary picked up her brush and began to arrange her hair in a fancy style. While she worked, she chatted about Kent and what their plans were for him and his future.

Over the next few minutes, Lottie learned that Grant had purchased this land with the idea that Kent would run the mine.

From what Lottie could tell, Mary fully expected Kent to be running the mine. In fact, she talked as if Kent was already doing so.

Lottie was so confused. Kent hadn’t mentioned anything in his letters about a silver mine. How was he going to run a mine and a ranch and be successful at both?

She pushed the questions aside. She would find out the answers soon enough.

Mary left the room to see if things were ready for the wedding downstairs. Lottie continued to stand and look at herself in the mirror.

Kent's mother had done her hair up so fancy, she barely recognized herself. She had to admit that she liked what Mary had created.

Her blond hair was piled on the top of her head with a few strands hanging by her ears in curls. The way Mary had arranged her hair revealed its natural highlights.

Lottie usually braided her hair and let it hang down her back, except for Sundays, when she pulled it all back in a tight bun. Mary had done the same style, except the hair around the bun was loose.

Lottie liked the way it made her look, almost pretty. She touched the top of her neck and wished she had some jewelry to wear. But overall, she was pleased with how she looked.

Mary soon returned. "They're ready for you."

Lottie put on a brave face and followed Mary downstairs. As she stepped into the parlor, the first person she saw was Kent.

His face lit up when he saw her, and any doubts she had deep inside faded away at his obvious delight. A warm, peaceful feeling spread through her heart.

She knew she had made the right decision.

Kent stood in the parlor of his home, waiting for Lottie to come down the stairs. His mother had gone up to help her get dressed, and he prayed she would be nice to her.

He had hoped Kathy would have been able to help Lottie prepare for the wedding, but there had been a problem at the mine that she had needed to take care of. She had arrived only a few minutes earlier, looking a bit flustered but wearing a nice silk dress for the occasion.

He felt nervous and excited. This was the start of a bright future, the future he'd always wanted. His talk with Lottie that morning had only cemented his decision to choose her.

As they'd walked around his ranch, the questions Lottie had asked indicated that she was aware of the work that needed to be done, and she wasn't afraid to help or make suggestions. She was intelligent and eager for her new life with him.

He could tell she was hurt that he hadn't told his parents about her, but she seemed like she understood his reasoning as to why.

He still wished they could have gotten married before his parents

had arrived from Denver, but since they were here, he would do his best to make this day a good one for Lottie. He didn't want her to regret her decision.

He glanced at his father, who stood nearby with a frown on his face. Grant took the opportunity to whisper, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course I am," Kent said with a frown. Why was he bringing this up now?

"Is this a decision you really want to make?" his father pressed, ignoring Kent's words.

"Yes," Kent said firmly.

His father stared at him for a moment and gave him a look that instantly planted a seed of doubt. He quickly pushed it away.

While he didn't like that his parents didn't approve, he had made his choice and knew deep down that Lottie was perfect for him and the life he was choosing to live.

Just then, Lottie walked into the parlor. Any doubts he might have had left the moment he saw her. He could hardly breathe as he looked at her. She was absolutely the most beautiful woman he knew.

Yes, she wasn't dressed like the young ladies that he had grown up with would have been. The dress she wore was plain, but it looked beautiful on her.

He took a step forward to meet her and took her hand. She smiled at him and, for a moment, everything faded away around them—it

was just the two of them.

“Shall we get started?” Mr. Fennell asked.

Keeping Lottie's hand in his, Kent guided her to take their places in front of the pastor, who held an open Bible in his hands.

For the next few minutes, Mr. Fennell talked about the importance of marriage. He read a scripture found in Genesis, about how a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.

Kent liked how Mr. Fennell had included that reminder in the ceremony. From now on, his focus would be with Lottie, not what his parents wanted him to do.

He would establish an allegiance with this wonderful woman at his side.

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. She kept her eyes on him and seemed to know that a promise was being made between them.

The vows were repeated, promising to love and honor each other from this day forward.

When Mr. Fennell spoke the words, “You may kiss the bride,” Kent did so eagerly, but gently. As he put his arms around her, he noticed she fit perfectly in his embrace.

Lottie stood at Kent's side, her hand tucked in his as Kathy congratulated them. Kent's sister seemed very happy for them—at least Lottie had one family member of Kent's on her side.

Grant and Mary also spoke, saying words that were expected of them. Mr. Fennell wished them well and introduced his wife, Victoria, who had also attended the wedding.

Lottie wished she had prepared some sort of refreshments for everyone. She was about to suggest they all go and sit on the porch and she would see what she could come up with when Mary spoke up.

“When everyone is ready, we need to go to Green Valley. Your father and I have a wedding gift waiting there,” Mary announced, looking very pleased with herself.

Lottie looked at Kent, wondering if he knew what it was, but he just shrugged his shoulders. She hoped Kent would tell his mother that they weren't going anywhere.

Why would they need to go to town for a wedding gift? Why couldn't Mary have just arranged for it to be brought here?

But because Kent allowed Mary to guide them outside, Lottie needed to go along with whatever his parents had planned.

She'd thought his parents would leave right after the wedding ceremony, and she had been looking forward to spending some time alone with Kent, but obviously that wasn't going to happen—at least, not right then.

They left the house to find a fancy carriage waiting in the yard, with two horses hitched up to it. A man Lottie didn't recognize sat in the front holding the reins, waiting for them.

Kent helped Lottie into the carriage and they were followed by his parents and Kathy. It was a tight fit for the five of them.

Even though the ride to town wasn't long, Lottie grew more and more uncomfortable. She wasn't used to sitting so close to people she didn't know.

When they arrived in town, the driver guided the horses down the main street and stopped in front of a large building. A sign above the door announced that this was the town hall.

Mary looked pleased with herself as she got out of the buggy and walked briskly toward the building.

“What’s going on, Mother?” Kent asked curiously.

“You’ll see when we get inside,” his mother responded.

Grant put a hand on Kent's shoulder. “Even though we didn’t have much time to plan anything, your mother has been very busy.”

As they walked inside, Lottie stopped in shock and looked around.

The room they stood in had been decorated to the hilt—everything was decked out.

Five long tables had been set up in the middle of the room, with light purple tablecloths covering each one. Fancy place settings sat in front of each chair, and elaborate flower arrangements were placed strategically around the room.

One table was covered with prepared food. Five people were lined up behind that table, dressed in plain black suits—they were going to serve the food.

There were also about thirty people in the room, mingling with each other, and a few of them walked straight toward the group when they entered. It was immediately clear to Lottie that they were of the high society Kent's family was part of.

They were well dressed and obviously very wealthy. In fact, most of the dresses the women wore were much fancier than the wedding dress she had on.

Lottie was glad when Kent tucked her hand in his. Everyone seemed eager to meet him, and Mary suggested they stand in a specific spot she had chosen so they could meet everyone.

Kent seemed familiar and comfortable in this type of setting, which shouldn't have surprised Lottie, she supposed. He greeted each person when they approached and introduced her.

Kent acted very proud of her as introductions were made, but Lottie began to feel more and more awkward. Some of the people asked uncomfortable questions, wanting to know where she was from and who her "people" were.

When they found out that she had grown up on a small farm in Maine, the looks they gave her and then Kent were of confusion, and some were of horror, as if they couldn't figure out what he saw in her. She had never felt more out of place in her life.

When the line of people began to thin, Mary approached them, grasping the elbow of a young lady.

“This is Sarah. I’ve hired her to be your housekeeper,” she announced.

“Housekeeper?” Lottie questioned with a glance at Kent. This was something she hadn’t even thought about.

She wasn’t sure she liked the idea of a stranger living with them, but if she was going to be helping Kent all day around the ranch, it would be nice to not need to worry about cleaning the large house and preparing meals.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sarah said as she gave a slight curtsy.

Lottie liked her immediately. Of all the people in the room, Sarah was most like her. She wore a simple dress, and her hair was braided down her back, much as Lottie liked to do with her own hair.

She looked to be a few years younger than Lottie and didn’t seem to mind how Mary was treating her—as a servant and not an equal.

“Where are you from, Sarah?” Lottie asked warmly, trying to put the girl at ease.

“I live with my parents and younger brothers at the edge of town,” Sarah answered.

“Sarah will be helping to serve the food, but she will move into the house this evening,” Mary added.

“It’s not necessary for us to have a housekeeper, Mother,” Kent said, frowning in disapproval.

“Oh, nonsense,” Mary said as she waved her lily-white hand in the air. “Sarah will be perfect for you. Now, it’s time to have our meal. You two need to sit at that table over there.”

She pointed to an empty table that sat in front of all the others. Kent led Lottie in that direction and helped her sit down before sliding into the chair beside her.

She wished she could talk to him about what was going on—about this wedding gift, and his mother hiring Sarah without their knowledge—but his parents and Kathy soon joined them.

The food was served by the hired caterers. It was delicious, although some of the food she had never eaten before.

When she asked Kent what one dish was, he told her it was called caviar, and at her look of confusion, he explained that the appetizer consisted of the eggs of a fish called the sturgeon, and was considered a delicacy.

She did her best to not look disgusted, but she didn’t eat that part of the meal. Why in the world would someone want to eat fish eggs, of all things?

The main dish was chicken with a salad of fresh greens and large rolls, which was more familiar for Lottie.

After the dessert was served, which was a white cake decorated

with fancy icing, Grant stood up, tapping his wine glass gently with a knife to get everyone's attention. He then held it up in the air and began to speak.

He talked for a full five minutes, praising his son and everything he had accomplished in his life. Kent frowned for a moment, but Lottie noticed with amazement that he quickly kept his feelings from showing on his face.

Grant didn't say one word about her to the crowd, as Kent's new wife, before he finally raised his glass again, showing an end to his elaborate toast. Everyone took a sip from their own glasses.

When his father sat down, Kent stood up, thanked his father for the kind words, and then pulled Lottie to her feet.

"I would like for everyone to officially meet my new bride," he said. "I want her to know that I'm so grateful she is willing to take a chance on me."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss on her cheek and then turned his attention to the many eyes that were on them.

"Thank you for coming and celebrating our wedding. I know this was planned at the last minute, but we appreciate your support."

After the required sip of wine, Lottie sat down gratefully, glad that this ritual was over. She set her glass down, too, happy that she wouldn't need to drink any more.

She was sure the wine Mary had chosen was of high quality, but Lottie didn't like the taste. She picked up her fork to take a bite of cake when she heard her name.

“Charlotte, do you have anything to say?” Grant asked in a loud, booming voice.

Lottie flushed, wanting to immediately insist that he not call her by that name. She glanced at Kent, hoping he would get her out of this mess.

She hated the idea of talking to so many people, especially because she didn't know any of them. She wished she could disappear.

“You can do it,” Kent whispered encouragingly.

With everyone's eyes on her, she slowly stood up and squared her shoulders. She wasn't going to let these people make her feel less than she was.

“Hello,” she called out as she raised her wine glass in the air. “I want to thank you all for coming.”

She paused, not sure what to say next, and not wanting to just repeat what Kent had just said. Then, she had an idea.

“This has been a delicious dinner in honor of our wedding. I'd like to invite each one of you to our ranch in the fall. We'll have a good, old-fashioned harvest party. We'll let you know the time and day as it gets closer to autumn.”

A few people clapped their approval at her announcement, which made her feel more bold.

“I want to repeat what my ma always told me. The secret to a happy marriage... will always remain a secret! Slainte!”

There was a long pause and then a few people laughed. Lottie

raised her glass, took a sip, and then sat down. Kent grinned through his laughter and put an arm around her.

But most of the people in the room weren't laughing at her joke. In fact, most of them had frowns on their faces, as well as some looks of confusion.

She had apparently made a terrible social blunder. She should have just smiled and thanked everyone for coming. But what was done could not be undone.

She didn't dare look at Grant or Mary. If they didn't like what she had said, they shouldn't have pushed her to talk. And these people might as well learn who she really was.

After they ate dessert, which now tasted like sawdust to Lottie, a few people came up to talk to them. Most again congratulated them on their marriage, but a few weren't afraid to say what was on their minds.

One older man even commented on Kent's ranch, indicating that he had no idea what he was getting himself into, how challenging it was going to be, and that maybe he had better rethink the idea of becoming a cattle rancher. Why wasn't he taking advantage of his father's plans?

Lottie began to realize that living in this area was going to be much harder than she had imagined. She was going to need to be tough and do everything she could to help her husband become a successful rancher.

It seemed like forever before the last person finally left and she was alone with Kent, Kathy, and their parents. Looking around the room, she noticed many dishes that needed to be cleared off the

table and automatically began to stack plates.

“Oh no, Charlotte. That’s not your job to do such work. The people we hired will handle it,” Mary said.

Lottie flushed at the words, but she set the plates down.

“My name is Lottie,” she said, giving Mary a firm look. The older woman had the grace to look away, and Lottie felt like she had won a small battle.

A few minutes later, she found herself back again in the carriage with Kent's family. She had been hoping that now that the reception was over, his parents would stay in a hotel in Green Valley and head back to Denver in the morning.

She soon found out that was not going to be the case, at least not in the near future.

Kent cleared his throat. “Mother and Father, I want to thank you for the beautiful reception. We do appreciate it.”

Lottie nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Now, I have to ask, how long are you two planning on staying?” Kent continued. “Maybe we should stop at the train station and purchase tickets to Denver. You could come and visit when we have the party Lottie mentioned.”

“We’re staying for the summer,” Grant declared.

Kent looked confused. “But why? Can you leave the stores for so long?”

“I have hired a good and responsible man. It won’t be a problem for us to stay for a few months. Besides, I want to make sure the mine is going to be run properly.”

Glancing at Kathy, Lottie saw a look of disappointment on her face before she turned away to look out of the carriage window. She felt bad for her new sister-in-law.

She hadn’t gotten much of a chance so far to spend time with Kathy, and Lottie was looking forward to getting to know her better in the coming days.

She also was a bit confused. She had gotten the idea that Kathy was involved with the mine somehow, but she wasn’t sure how.

Lottie felt extremely disappointed that Grant and Mary were staying, but for different reasons. She didn't know how she was going to figure out how to deal with her new life while also having her in-laws around.

Obviously, this was something she was going to have to get used to.

That night, Lottie sat on the bed that she was going to be sharing with Kent, her back against a wall. He had helped her move her trunk into the room and then disappeared for a few hours.

This had given her time to unpack all of her belongings, including the dresses she'd laid out on the guestroom bed. As she hung her clothing in the closet next to Kent's, she immediately could see the difference between the fabric.

Her dresses were worn and thin, and her shoes were scuffed. The only dress she had that was of higher quality was her traveling suit, which desperately needed to be washed.

Kent's shirts were almost too fancy to be worn around a ranch. On the floor, she saw six pairs of shoes, but she didn't see a pair of boots anywhere.

She had to laugh that Kent had more shoes than an average man actually needed and not a single pair would be appropriate for working on the ranch. From what she could tell, they both needed to make a trip to the nearest store for new clothes.

She needed to quit comparing her life and how she was raised to his, if they were going to make this marriage work. And they needed to have a talk before anything else happened.

She had so many questions for him, some that she wished she had been able to ask that morning.

When Kent finally showed up, she was in the bed waiting for him. He closed the door behind him and sat on a chair to remove his shoes.

Leaving on his shirt and pants, he made himself comfortable on the bed beside her and picked up her hand. "This was a crazy day, but I'm glad it's over with," he said, his voice heavy with relief.

Lottie wasn't sure what he meant by that. Was he glad it was over because of how controlling his parents had been with their wedding? Or because they were now alone together?

"There is something we need to talk about before our marriage goes any further," Lottie said firmly.

"What is it?" Kent asked, concern in his eyes.

"I need to know about your family dynamics, about the mine, your parents, everything."

"I've told you quite a bit," Kent pointed out. "What else do you want to know?"

"When I accepted your proposal, I wasn't aware that you came from such a well-to-do family," she confessed. "I don't think your parents will ever accept me for who I am."

“I have to admit that my parents can be snobs, but they mean well. Besides, they live in Denver. Once they head home, we won’t need to worry about their social expectations.”

“Yet they’re planning on staying here for the summer,” Lottie pointed out.

Kent signed. “I know. I’m not happy about that myself, but there isn’t much I can do about it. My father has invested quite a bit in the mine, and he has every right to make sure it’s being run properly.”

“That’s another question I have. What is going on with the mine?”

“Father bought this land with the plan that I would run the mine, even though I told him I had no interest in doing so. Once I came out here with Kathy, she told me she actually wanted a chance to run it, and I thought it was a good idea.”

Lottie grinned, loving the idea that Kathy was interested in doing something few women would even attempt. “Good for her. What does the mine have to do with the ranch?” she asked.

“Without my father’s knowledge, I started the ranch up. The mine is located at the edge of this land, and there weren’t any plans to use the rest of it. I felt like it was perfect for a ranch. Kathy agreed.”

Kent continued to tell her everything he had done over the last few months. Lottie had to admit she admired Kent for deciding what his dream was and moving forward with it, even when he knew it was going to upset his parents.

It showed her he was willing to stand up for what he believed in.

He was willing to marry her to fulfill his dreams.

Kent then confessed that he had hoped he would be able to get the ranch going before his father knew exactly what was going on, which was not what happened.

“I do have to say that I was feeling like you’d lied to me. I came out here expecting to see an established ranch.

“Instead, I learned that you’re just starting out,” Lottie said slowly. “I thought you were a rancher, but clearly, you are not.”

“But I am a rancher, or at least I’m working toward being one,” Kent argued. “I am really sorry. I didn’t bring you out here to marry me out of desperation.

“It was Kathy’s idea, that I find a wife that would be able to help me get the ranch started. After thinking about it, I thought it was a good idea, and I placed the ad. When I saw your first letter, I knew you would be perfect, and you are.”

Lottie tried not to feel pleased with his words and brought up her next concern. “I’m afraid your father is going to do everything he can to stop you from running this ranch.

“He’s clearly very powerful, and he could do that if he wanted to. He has the money to get whatever he wants.”

“I don’t want to be like my parents. I don’t want money to be the most important thing in my life, more than family. I want to work for what I earn.

“I want to be outside, to feel the wind in my hair and to enjoy all that life and nature have to offer. I would hate spending my days

in an office, and I would especially hate working in a mine.”

Lottie’s heart softened. She knew exactly what he was talking about. Wasn’t that the main reason why she decided to be a mail-order bride?

She didn’t want to spend her days in a closed-up, stuffy factory. She also wanted to feel the wind in her hair.

“I promise that I didn’t mean to mislead you. I kept the information that I am a new rancher out of the letters because I’m trying to start over, and I’m not sure if I can even do it.”

Lottie smiled. It was going to be a challenge to make this life, and their marriage, what they both wanted. Even though they had very different upbringings, they had the same goals.

If Lottie was going to go through life with anyone, she was glad it was going to be with Kent. She had finally found someone who seemed to understand her and appreciate her for who she was.

If he would overlook her flaws, she could do the same with his.

“I think you can do it, or at least we can do it together,” Lottie said.

“I can tell you have access to a lot of money, though—you’ve only been on this land for a few months, and there is already a large house built, a barn almost up, fences made, and cattle purchased. I have to ask, what money are you using?” she pressed.

“The money I’m using is my own that I inherited,” Kent explained. “Although most of it is almost gone. I’m not planning on using any of my father’s money.

“He did purchase this land, though, so technically it is his, but everything on it—the house, barn, the cattle—is mine.”

Lottie was glad to hear that he hadn't used any of his father's money, but she was also concerned. There was an obvious glaring difference between them.

Kent had a dream to be a successful rancher and had used most of his money to get established, instead of saving at least some of it.

It was a good thing she knew how to cut corners and do without. It might be something Kent was going to need to learn in the future.

But now, as Kent slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him, all thoughts of money, cattle, and his family fled her mind.

She was ready to start this marriage fully as his wife, and she let him know that by giving him a gentle kiss.

Lottie woke up before the sun rose early the next morning, like she usually did. She did lay in bed for a few minutes, thinking about the conversation she'd had with Kent the night before.

She felt good about their discussion. Looking over at him, she could tell he was still sound asleep. Suddenly wide awake, she slid out of bed and quickly dressed.

Should she wake him? After all, if he was going to run a ranch, he needed to get used to waking up early.

But this was something they had not talked about the night before, so she was reluctant to disturb him. Instead, she quietly left the room.

The house was silent as she walked down the stairs and out the door. She went outside to take care of the early morning chores of feeding the chickens, gathering the eggs, and milking the cow.

Because there were only a few chickens to take care of and just the one cow, she was back inside less than an hour later.

Without thinking about it, she began to do what she always did at

home: make a big breakfast. In her opinion, breakfast was the most important meal of the day.

And if she could show Kent's parents how well she could cook, it might impress them.

After getting the fire in the stove started, she began to heat some coffee. She found a bowl and the ingredients to make pancakes and whipped up some batter.

She fried some salt pork and mixed up the eggs she had gathered into a bowl. As she finished the last touches of breakfast, placing a bowl of scrambled eggs on the table, Mary and Grant came into the kitchen.

It didn't take Mary long to figure out that Lottie had been the one to cook everything and she looked at her in disbelief. "What is all this?"

"It's breakfast," Lottie said proudly. "I thought it would be nice for all of us to sit down and enjoy the first meal of the day."

"Where is Sarah?"

Lottie looked at her in confusion, and then remembered that Mary had hired Sarah as a housekeeper. It was obvious Mary was expecting Sarah to have been the one to make breakfast, not Lottie.

"I haven't seen her." She had forgotten that the young woman was to have arrived the night before.

A look of anger crossed Mary's face as she went to the door just off the kitchen, where Sarah was to be staying. After she knocked harshly on it, the door opened.

Sarah was dressed but looked disheveled, as if she had just woken up. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said with embarrassment. “I slept in. I’m not used to getting up so early.”

“It’s okay,” Lottie said, trying to reassure her. “I’ve made breakfast. Why don’t you come and join us?”

“Sarah is not going to be eating with us,” Mary said firmly, glaring at Lottie.

Lottie did her best to not shrink under the harsh look—she needed to do what she could to not let Mary know that she was intimidated. She was about to let Mary know that in her house, Sarah was going to be eating with them, when Mary turned on the girl.

“It is not acceptable for you to have slept in. You know your duty and you know what you were to do when you were hired. I want you to pack up your things. You are leaving.”

“But...” Lottie started, trying to say something to get Mary to stop her harsh words to the young woman.

Mary ignored her and continued to berate Sarah. The more she talked, the more devastated Sarah looked until the girl ran into her room, slamming the door behind her. Lottie turned to Mary.

“I can’t believe you spoke to her like that. No one should be treated like that in my home,” Lottie insisted.

“She’s just the help. She needs to learn her place,” Mary argued.

“She made a mistake, and it’s partly my fault. I had forgotten that she was even here. Tomorrow, I will make sure that she gets up

when I do,” Lottie said, trying to smooth things over.

“There won't be a tomorrow for her because she is leaving. We are paying her income and you have no say in it.”

Mary looked at Lottie, visibly furious. “You clearly have a lot to learn if you are going to run the house properly for my son.”

Lottie was so angry, she had to bite her tongue to keep from saying anything that would make the situation worse. Instead, she turned on her heel and left the house.

She wasn't going to spend one more moment in the same room as Mary. Besides, she had a ranch to run, after all.

She hurried to the field, where two horses were grazing. She climbed through the fence posts and was easily able to catch one of them.

Using a rope that she'd found hanging on a hook, she tied it to the halter and led the horse to the barn, where she found a saddle. It didn't take her long to prepare the horse for a good run.

She swung onto the horse and let the mare go where she wished, as long as it was away from the house and the tension she'd left behind.

Without Lottie noticing, the mare had taken her to the cattle in the far field. She definitely hadn't been paying attention because of everything that had just happened with Kent's mother.

She slowed the horse to a walk and patted her neck. “I don't know what your name is, so I'm going to call you Sally until I know differently,” she murmured.

As she rode, she began to relax and looked around at her surroundings. The grassy fields became rockier and the trees thicker as she rode closer to the mountains.

When she saw a small building in the distance, Lottie headed in that direction—this was likely the cabin that Kathy was living in.

While she felt a bit nervous, she wanted to get to know Kent's sister. She remembered interacting with her the day she arrived, but Kathy hadn't been around since.

Because of everything Lottie had been dealing with, getting ready for her wedding and handling Kent's parents, she had briefly wondered where Kathy was, until she learned she was living in the cabin alone.

She looped the reins around a post and knocked on the door, which swung open a moment later. Kathy stood in the doorway, dressed in men's clothing. In fact, Lottie almost didn't recognize her.

Her hair was pulled back and tucked under a large floppy hat. She wore a gray shirt and brown pants with a large belt tied around her waist and heavy boots on her feet.

She looked at Lottie with confusion for a minute before she grinned. "Hi, Lottie. I sure didn't expect you to be knocking on my door. Is Kent with you?"

Lottie shook her head. "He's still asleep. I decided to take a ride and ended up here."

"Well, come in." Kathy reached out, grasped her hand, and pulled her inside. "Sit down and I'll get you some coffee."

She sat on one of the two chairs available in the cabin. As Kathy poured coffee into a metal cup, Lottie looked around.

The cabin was quite small. It was one room, with a kitchen on one side and a sitting area on the other. A wood stove sat against a wall between the two areas, and another door led to what Lottie assumed was the bedroom.

But Kathy had made the cabin her own, with stuffed pillows on the chairs, a simple painting of some mountains hung on the wall, and a small rag rug near the front door. Blue gingham curtains decorated the two windows.

“I know it’s not much, but it’s mine,” Kathy said, handing Lottie the coffee.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Lottie said as she took a sip of the brew.

“I haven’t been able to talk to you much, but I do want to welcome you to the family,” Kathy said and sat down in the other chair. “I know my parents haven’t been very welcoming, but I don’t feel the same.”

“Thank you,” Lottie said. “Your words mean a lot to me. Kent explained how you encouraged him to place the ad and I wanted to thank you for that.”

“Kent has had so many dreams, and Father always did his best to crush all of them. I felt like at least one of his dreams should come to pass.”

She smiled. “And I think you will be good for him. Maybe eventually, you will be able to convince Mother and Father of that fact.”

Lottie gave a soft laugh. “I doubt I’ll ever be able to please your parents, but I do believe in Kent’s plans for this land. I want to help and I see the potential of this ranch.”

“I have some advice for you. Don’t let my parents change who you are. I can tell you’ve been raised very differently than we were. Neither way is good or bad, just different,” Kathy commented.

“I didn’t say much yesterday at your wedding, but I watched. Kent was happy, and I think you’ll be good together.”

“Kent told me you’ve agreed to run the mine in his place,” Lottie said.

Kathy’s eyes lit up at Lottie’s obvious interest. In the next few minutes, Lottie listened as Kathy talked about her plans for the mine.

She wasn’t doing the main work in the mountain—that is, digging for the silver. Lottie had no idea how much work went into mining silver; in her mind, she had imagined it would be easily found.

But Kathy explained that the miners would dig into an area underground where silver had been previously found. Then, they would bring the rocks that they broke apart to the surface.

One of Kathy’s jobs was to go through the rocks and set aside any with threads of silver. These were loaded on wagons and taken to a factory in nearby Carson City, where they were melted down.

Kathy also told her about a man her father had hired to help get the mine started, Riley Guthrie. The idea was that Riley would be let go once the mine was successful, but Kathy had already told him that he had a permanent job, although her father didn’t know

that yet.

Riley didn't seem too worried about having a woman as his boss, according to Kathy.

His concern was that she would want to work underground and was relieved when she informed him that she had other things to take care of. He was happy to work alongside the men and keep them in line, handling any heavy lifting.

Lottie chuckled when she learned that Riley had already fired two men who had not behaved professionally toward Kathy, and instead had propositioned her. It was a good reminder to the rest of the men to stay clear of the boss if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Kathy handled the business end of things, making sure they had enough equipment, and looked after the finances.

It was going well, she said, even though they had only been in operation for a few months. They were already making a small profit and Kathy seemed very proud of that fact—and rightly so.

Lottie wanted to ask Kathy how she was dealing with her parents' obvious reluctance to support her, but she didn't feel she knew her sister-in-law well enough to ask such personal questions. But she wanted to see if there was a positive way to handle the dislike they portrayed toward her.

"I had better go," Lottie said hesitantly when she realized she'd been visiting with Kathy for almost an hour. She'd wanted to ask Kathy to give her a tour of the mine but knew she needed to get back.

“I didn’t tell anybody where I was going. I just left. Besides, I’m sure you have other things to do. I’m probably keeping you from working,” she added apologetically.

“I’m sorry you felt like you had to leave your own home to get away from the tension,” Kathy said. “Things will get better, though. Just hang in there.”

She stood when Lottie did, then reached out a hand and grasped hers. “I’m so glad you came and I’m happy you and Kent married. I think you’ll be good for each other.”

As Lottie rode away from the small cabin, she tucked the knowledge that she had made a new friend deep in her heart. If things continued to go so well with Kent, and now with a friendship developing with Kathy, she knew she could handle whatever Mary and Grant threw at her.

Kent opened his eyes slowly, like he usually did in the mornings. It always took him at least ten minutes to fully wake up and for his brain to begin to work.

But this morning, Lottie wasn't in bed with him.

The room was bright with sunlight, letting him know that he had slept too long. He groaned, but got up and quickly dressed, wishing Lottie had woken him up.

When he entered the kitchen, he found his parents very upset.

Grant was sitting at the table, a fierce scowl on his face. Mary was pacing the floor, which was out of character for her. While his mother got upset, she rarely showed her emotions in this way.

Instead, she would take care of the problem calmly and rationally. She always prided herself that she could handle any issue without raising her voice.

The door to Sarah's room was open and he could hear sniffing from inside. A bag full of dresses sat near the door.

“What’s going on?” he asked with concern. “Where is Lottie?”

“Your wife is not capable of running a household, that’s what is going on,” his mother retorted angrily, giving him a glare.

She let him know with that look that he had better take care of the problem immediately or his life would never be the same again.

Kent’s heart sank. Something had clearly happened between Lottie and his mother, and he had slept through it all.

He wished his parents hadn’t decided to spend the summer there, and he wondered what he could do to convince them to at least stay at the hotel in Green Valley.

“Tell me what happened,” he said, trying not to sigh with disappointment.

If only Lottie had woken him when she got up, maybe he could have put a stop to this conflict. He hoped he could smooth things over with his parents; then he needed to go find Lottie.

“Imagine my surprise when I woke up this morning and found Charlotte making breakfast.” Mary waved a hand at the food that was now cold on the table.

His stomach growled when he saw a plate heaped with pancakes and eggs and he realized he could smell coffee in the air. He picked up a pancake and took a bite.

“What’s wrong with that?” Kent asked, feeling a bit confused as he swallowed.

“It’s not her job to cook! We hired Sarah for that.” Mary glared at

the open doorway. “Of course, Sarah was in her room, sleeping the day away.”

“Did you wake her up?”

“Charlotte did. Sarah said she had slept in. Instead of insisting that Sarah finish preparing the food, Charlotte actually invited her to eat breakfast with us.”

Mary sounded shocked that Lottie had actually expected a servant to eat with them.

“I immediately told Sarah that she is being let go. Charlotte didn’t agree with my decision and quite rudely told me so. Then she left the house in a huff, just like a child.”

Kent looked at the closed kitchen door that led outdoors, his concern for his wife growing. “And she hasn’t returned?”

Mary shook her head. “We haven’t seen her since.” She put her hands on her hips. “Kent, dear. You really need to have a long talk with Charlotte.

“If she treats the help like that, letting them sleep in, allowing them to eat meals with you, she will get taken advantage of. You will lose money.

“Even worse,” she added, “you will lose the respect of others. You can’t allow that to happen.”

Kent felt frustrated as his mother talked, her harsh words cutting Lottie down.

If only she had woken him up when she’d left the room to start her

day. Maybe he could have done something to defuse this entire drama before it even began.

Mary continued, listing all the faults she perceived in Lottie. Kent ran a hand through his hair, trying to keep his anger under control. He needed to put a stop to this.

While he was aware that his parents didn't approve of his choice of a wife, he wasn't going to allow Mary to criticize Lottie.

"Mother," Kent said, cutting her off mid-word. She stared at him, in shock that he had actually interrupted her.

"Mother!" he said again, trying to keep his voice even, but he needed her to understand what he wanted to say. "First of all, she wants to be called Lottie, not Charlotte.

"I would appreciate it if you could remember that. And next, I realize Father bought this land that I'm using to start up my ranch, but this is my house.

"I built it with my money. And I chose Lottie as my wife; she has the right to run our house as she sees fit."

Mary gave him a look as if she couldn't believe what he was saying. "I'm sure you realize that we are paying Sarah's salary. It is part of our wedding gift to you.

"I knew I should have hired a woman from Denver. If I had, we wouldn't be having this problem." She gave him a glare, letting him know that she had recovered from her shock.

"Since we are paying her salary, I have every right to demand she perform her job correctly. I'm also in a position to fire her."

Kent held up a hand to stop her from more criticizing words and stood up. "I'm going to go find Lottie. We'll talk about who is paying Sarah's wages later, but she is not leaving."

He walked over to the open doorway and knocked on the door to get the maid's attention.

"Sarah, I'm very sorry for the mixup, but you are welcome to stay, if you wish." He glanced at his mother to make sure that she understood what he had to say next.

"My parents are not in charge of this house or your duties. I feel that this is our fault. I need to leave, but when I return with Lottie, we will sit down and go over what we expect from you."

Sarah didn't say anything, but she nodded her head and looked very relieved.

"Why don't you come and get a plate of food before it goes to waste? I'm sure you're hungry," he suggested.

She nodded again, but didn't move from her spot.

Kent turned to his parents. "And I don't want either of you to say anything negative to Sarah while I'm gone. Let her eat and then unpack her things."

"Where are you going?" Grant asked, speaking for the first time.

"I'm going to find Lottie," Kent announced again as he put his hat on and left the house, letting the screen door slam behind him.

One glance around the yard let him know that Lottie wasn't around, so he headed toward his barn, hoping he'd find her there.

While he was very frustrated with his parents, he also wasn't surprised.

This was how he was raised: there was a definite line between the members of his family and the hired help.

His parents did pay their employees well, but they also expected them to work hard to earn those wages. There was a certain way they had to act around the family members.

This was one more thing he wanted to change in his life. He wanted to give Sarah a chance, although he was sure she had no idea what she was getting herself into by accepting this job.

He could tell just from the way Sarah dressed that she had never worked as a servant before in her life. She didn't wear the standard servant's clothing of a white blouse and a black shirt.

Instead, she wore a handmade gingham dress. Sarah probably had learned how to cook and clean from her mother, not from a housekeeper or a maid who worked for the elite.

There would be a learning curve for her, but Kent was willing to allow her the time she needed to learn what her job entailed.

He could almost guess that her mother hadn't told her she was expected to wake up early to make breakfast. And it hadn't occurred to him to talk to her before going to bed.

His focus had been on Lottie and his recent marriage, not the new maid.

The barn and the land around it was empty, with no sign of Lottie. One of the horses his father had given him, Lady, was missing,

along with her saddle. Lottie must have gone for a ride.

It only took him a moment to saddle Jack with the intent to find her. He swung on the horse's back and looked around.

He wasn't sure which way Lottie would have gone, but instinct told him that she would have ridden toward the mine. She had asked a lot of questions about the operation when she first arrived, so curiosity likely would have pulled her in that direction.

Sure enough, after riding for about five minutes, he saw her coming toward him on the back of Lady. He pulled Jack to a stop and waited for her to approach.

"Good morning," Lottie greeted him brightly.

He smiled, glad to see that she was alright and she seemed happy, not at all upset like he had expected her to be.

"Hello. Imagine my surprise when I woke up and found my wife gone. I had hoped we could talk for a few minutes before we started our first day of married life."

Lottie blushed, which Kent found delightful. "I'm used to getting up early, before the sun rises."

"Where have you been?"

Her face brightened. "I just had a nice visit with your sister."

"Kathy?"

"Yes, unless you have another one I don't know about," she teased.

He relaxed in the saddle. "I'm glad you're getting to know her. I was afraid..."

He didn't finish his sentence, wondering if Lottie wasn't as upset as his mother had indicated. Had Mary exaggerated her interaction with Lottie?

"Afraid of what? That I ran off because I had some awful words with your mother?" Lottie asked, her face clouding a little.

"I heard about that. I'm sorry you had to deal with her by yourself," Kent said. "I should have been there. Can you tell me what happened?"

He wanted to get her side of the story, and he was glad he had asked as she quietly described how she had gotten up that morning and taken care of the morning chores.

When they were completed, and seeing that Sarah hadn't yet gotten up, she had decided to make breakfast for everyone.

"My mother always did that, made a large breakfast for the family," Lottie explained. "I had hoped it would be a nice way to start our marriage and include your parents. But they weren't impressed."

She continued, explaining how upset Mary had gotten when she'd learned that Sarah hadn't prepared the food and had immediately fired the young woman.

Kent smiled when Lottie admitted that she'd told Mary she was being cruel to Sarah and that in her house, no one should be treated like that.

“That was when I left. I knew if I stayed, I would say something to make the situation worse. I will admit that I’m frustrated. Your parents want me to be a person that I’m not.”

She sighed. “And I don’t think I can be the woman they want me to be.”

Kent smiled. “Don’t worry about what my parents expect. I want you to be exactly as you are. We’ve only known each other a few days outside of our letters, but I can tell you’re kind and hardworking.

“I think you should keep carrying on the way you are. My parents will be fine, and if they aren’t, well, they can just head back to Denver.”

Lottie relaxed at his words—he had said the right thing. They began to head back to the barn together. He was glad he had warded off a tense situation, at least for now.

Lottie hadn’t even hinted that she wished they hadn’t married. Maybe, as they worked together to get the ranch going, his parents would realize they were good for each other.

Kent felt pleased that he’d been able to have a good talk with his new wife. He had been honest when he’d told her he wanted her to be who she was, not who his parents wanted her to be.

But he did have one major concern. If his parents decided to cut him off from the family’s money before his ranch could start earning a profit, he wasn’t going to be successful.

He didn’t know what would happen to them if his father did that. And it wasn’t just himself that he was concerned about—he now

had a wife to support.

This was the only thing that held Kent back from being totally honest with his parents. He wanted to start this new life he had chosen without their constant interference.

He wished money wasn't always the root of problems he had with his parents.

Lottie and Kent took care of the horses before heading into the house. Mary and Grant were nowhere to be seen and Lottie was relieved. She really didn't want to deal with them right then.

Kent had told her about his conversation with his parents. While it felt good to hear that he had supported her and the way she wanted to handle their household, she wondered if she was going to end up coming between Kent and his parents.

She didn't like that concept at all. In an ideal world, they would all get along and accept each other.

She spent a few hours with Sarah and was glad to hear that the young woman was willing to stay. Lottie promised her that Mary or Grant didn't have permission to dictate what she did.

It was hard for Lottie to tell Sarah what she expected of her, especially because she could easily cook and clean herself. She wasn't used to having someone around to do her work for her.

But she didn't want to spend her days in the house. She wanted to be outside working with the cattle and the land. She wanted to spend her days at Kent's side.

Sarah seemed relieved when she learned exactly what her job would be. Lottie also made sure she knew she was invited to eat with them if she felt comfortable doing so.

Kent's parents were gone most of the day. Lottie almost asked Kent if he knew where they had gone, but decided she didn't want to know.

She enjoyed the rest of the day with Kent. The men he'd hired came from town to put the finishing touches on the barn.

Although Lottie could tell Kent didn't have much knowledge of how to saw boards and hammer nails, he was eager to learn. The men didn't seem to mind that he was trying to help out.

With Kent's support, Lottie spent the afternoon planning a vegetable garden. Since it was already June, the planting season wouldn't be as long as it could have been if the vegetables had been put in the ground a few months previously, but she hoped to grow beans, peas, and spinach.

It was too late to plant any root vegetables, except for carrots. Of course, she needed to get some seeds, and she hoped she'd be able to find some in Green Valley.

She found a spot for the garden near the meadow behind the house. There was a large area that didn't have much grass on it which Lottie felt would be perfect, although it would need to be cleared and plowed before she could plant anything.

She wondered if Sarah would be willing to help with that project.

That evening, they enjoyed fried chicken, mashed potatoes with creamy gravy, and canned green beans for dinner. Sarah did eat

with them, although Lottie wondered if she would have if Grant and Mary had been there, but they had not yet returned from wherever they had gone.

Lottie again woke up early the next morning—and this time, she also woke up Kent. There were some things he needed to learn if they were going to run this ranch properly.

Though he'd seemed tired when he woke up, he willingly got dressed. Before they went outside, Lottie knocked on Sarah's door three times to make sure she was also awake.

After hearing an answering call, Lottie and Kent went outside.

They did the morning chores together, feeding the chickens and gathering eggs. Kent had already learned how to milk the cow and Lottie left him to it, although she could have gotten it done in half the time.

While he milked, Lottie cleaned out the stalls and provided the horses with their morning grain. When Kent was done with his chore, he poured some of the milk into a small bowl for the barn cat, which made Lottie smile.

They went inside to have breakfast, and Lottie was pleased to see that Sarah had it almost finished. She was also glad Mary and Grant were nowhere to be seen and assumed they were still in bed.

Sarah joined them again, and Lottie decided to try to get to know her a bit better. Sarah didn't seem much younger than she was and Lottie wondered if they could be friends.

"How long have you lived in Green Valley?" Lottie asked her.

“I was born in San Francisco, but we moved here when I was five,” Sarah said. “Pa inherited a farm from his uncle.”

“Do you have any siblings?” Kent asked.

“I’m the oldest of five children. I have two sisters and two brothers. Ma just had a baby boy a few months ago.”

“Tell us about your farm,” Lottie suggested curiously.

Sarah grinned. “The farm my pa owns is nowhere near as big as this ranch is. But I know what running a ranch entails. A lot of hard work and a bit of good luck with the weather.”

She looked a bit shy for a moment and then continued. “I want you both to know that I am very grateful for this job.

“I know I didn’t get started in the best way, and I apologize for that. But I promise I will do my best to keep this house clean and provide good meals for you both to eat.”

“I have to admit I’m glad I don’t need to worry about cleaning and cooking,” Lottie confessed. “And so far, you’ve done a great job.”

Thankfully, Kent didn’t seem concerned that she wanted to work outside instead of in the house like his father had expected her to, just because she was a woman. He was very open to her suggestions.

Having Sarah in their household was going to make her life much easier.

After breakfast, Lottie and Kent went out to saddle their horses. Kent had told her the names of the horses, and Lottie was a bit

concerned that Lady and Jack weren't going to be good around cattle.

She knew from experience that while some horses didn't have a problem with cattle, others were easily spooked around them.

Grant had given these horses to Kent as part of a wedding gift, along with the fancy carriage that now sat behind the barn.

Lottie didn't have much knowledge of thoroughbred horses, but she could tell they had good lines. But when horses were trained to pull wagons or fancy carriages, sometimes that was all they were good for.

As they approached the cattle in the far field, Lottie kept a strict eye on both horses and was relieved that neither seemed nervous. In fact, Jack seemed eager to get near the cattle.

Once they arrived, it didn't take Lottie long to see what needed to be done.

"These cows need to be moved out of this field and into another," she said, pointing to a large brown area. "Can you see how most of the green grass is gone? They aren't getting the nutrients they need.

"This herd is going to need to be moved to a new field every few days. It will give the grass a chance to regrow while the cattle are eating in another part of the ranch."

"That makes sense," Kent said, nodding. "The field next to this one is almost fenced in. I just need to finish the last section. When that's done, we can move them there."

“I can help you with that,” Lottie offered.

It only took a few hours to finish the fence. The posts had already been put in place, they just needed to string wire between them.

Again, Kent was quite slow, but he was eager to learn, and when Lottie showed him an easier way to string the wire, he adopted her way immediately and without questioning her suggestions.

As they worked together, she began to relax.

Lottie realized she had actually been a little worried that Kent would be unwilling to take any of her ideas or make any changes. In fact, he seemed more relieved and grateful than anything.

Once the fence was completed, they got back on their horses and rode to the field where the cattle were. Kent got off his horse and Lottie watched silently as he tied Jack to the side of the fence and opened the gate.

When he walked inside and began to walk toward the cattle, she was puzzled by what he was doing.

“Where are you going?” she finally asked.

He looked at her with confusion in his eyes. “I’m going to move the cattle into the new field.”

“Why are you not on Jack?”

This time, it was Kent who looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Let me show you how this is done,” Lottie said.

She urged Lady forward and was glad when the mare responded easily. It would have been embarrassing if Lady had refused to get near the cattle when she was acting like she knew exactly what she was doing.

It took her a few minutes to help Lady figure out what she wanted her to do, but Lottie soon had the cattle gathered into a tight circle, and then she slowly moved them toward the gate.

She had never moved this many cattle before, but it didn't take her long to get them out of the field and into the next. Part of the reason they had cooperated so easily was because they wanted the fresh green grass—it wouldn't always go so smoothly.

Once they were all inside, Kent closed the gate, looking impressed. "It never occurred to me that you could do this on the back of a horse," he said. "I've been moving them on foot.

"It always takes me half the day, and I'm always chasing one of them that decides to run in the wrong direction. It's exhausting. You're going to have to teach me how to do that."

Lottie laughed, trying to picture him running behind the cows, waving his hat in the air to get them to move and yelling to try to get their attention.

"We will need to move them again in a few days, so I can help you learn how to do this before then. For now, we need to prepare another field. There really should be at least four or even five fields that we can alternate the cattle to every few days."

Kent nodded his agreement. "I have more equipment for fence building behind the barn."

After enjoying the delicious beef sandwiches Sarah prepared for them, they spent the afternoon building another fence. Kent knew a fast way to dig holes and Lottie was impressed at how soft and fertile the soil was out here. Because of this, digging the holes for the posts went fairly quickly.

She liked how they worked easily together. Of course, there were obvious signs that Kent had never done this type of work before. His hands had blisters all over them, even with the gloves he wore.

But despite his upbringing, he took to this new life easily. She could tell he loved it and seemed thrilled to be outside working on the land.

She was grateful she had this opportunity to do what she loved with such a good man.

They didn't make it back to the house until late that evening, a few hours after dinner had been served. Kent was starving, but Sarah had thankfully left some food warming on the stove.

After cleaning up a bit, he and Lottie enjoyed the meal. He was glad Sarah was working for them, and he hoped his parents hadn't given her too many problems that day.

He had been impressed when Lottie had talked to Sarah the evening before. She'd been friendly and open, and for a few minutes Kent had worried Lottie was being too familiar with the young woman.

But Sarah had responded to Lottie and her positive comments. The conversation had ended well, with Sarah promising that if she felt she needed to leave the position, she would talk with them first.

He could hear murmuring voices in the parlor, giving away the location of his parents. After they ate, Kent headed to that area of the house and Lottie followed him, leaving Sarah to wash the dishes they'd used.

Mary and Grant were sitting in his two most comfortable chairs,

each reading their own book. He was pleasantly surprised to see that Kathy was also there, some embroidery in her lap.

She gave him a grin in greeting and stood to give him a hug. "I'm glad you're home." She turned her smile to include Lottie. "You two have been working hard."

"You're finally back," Grant added in a loud booming voice.

Kent cringed when he heard the disapproval. He wanted to ask Kathy how her work was coming on the mine but would need to ask her later.

"There's a lot we need to do around the ranch to make it successful," Kent said to his father.

He wanted to tell his family what he'd learned that day. For example, it hadn't occurred to him that he needed to rotate the cattle to encourage new growth of the grass.

Lottie knew quite a bit about cattle, fence building, and working with horses, and he wanted to explain those things to his parents.

He wanted them to see that side of Lottie, that she was a smart and intelligent woman. He wished his father would ask him questions about what they were doing, to show some interest in the ranch.

But his father couldn't care less. In fact, his next words confirmed Kent's suspicions.

"I had hoped you both would be back much sooner because I have something important to tell you." Grant paused, looking mighty pleased with himself. "I have invited some business guests to come and see the mine."

Kent exchanged glances with Kathy, and she seemed equally surprised to hear about these guests' arrival. And she didn't seem happy about it. "When will they be here?"

Tomorrow afternoon," Grant said. "They will be staying for a few days." He glanced at Kathy before continuing.

"I'm aware that you have somehow been able to talk your sister into doing the work you should be doing on the mine. But I will need you to be available for this meeting tomorrow.

"Kathy, you can spend the day with your mother and the men's wives," he added.

Kathy's face reddened and she looked like she was ready to explode. Kent spoke before his sister could say anything.

"Father, I have explained to you repeatedly that I do not want anything to do with mine. Kathy is doing great and with Riley's help, I think it can be successful. Why can't you give her a chance to show you what she can do?"

"It's not fitting for a woman to be working in a mine," Mary said with a slight shudder. "In fact, Kathy, I have been thinking about your situation—I think it would be a good idea for you to head back to Denver.

"Jeffrey Benson expressed interest in you to me the last time I saw him. I'm sure if you gave him even a little bit of interest, he would begin to court you."

Kent frowned at his mother. Her words had upset Kathy, as had their father's.

Not only had she demeaned her daughter because she was a woman, she had reminded Kathy that she was not yet married and was not doing her duty.

And Grant was totally dismissing her and everything she had already done for the mine.

“Who are these men, Father?” Kent asked.

“Samuel Rodgers and Trent Ferguson. You met one of them at the ball we attended a few months ago. In fact, Samuel has offered to invest some money in the mine.

“But I know for a fact that he will not agree if you are not the one running it,” Grant said firmly. “Trent is coming because he is interested in purchasing a silver mine of his own.”

Before Kent could say anything, Mary cut in, giving Lottie a determined look.

“The two guest rooms upstairs will need to be prepared for them. And you will need to tell Sarah that she should make fancier meals. They aren’t used to such simple... dishes.”

“Mother...” Kent was beginning to wish that they had kept working on the fence until it was too dark to see. Lottie had actually suggested that, but he had been too hungry.

Mary held up a hand. “Don’t worry about food or supplies. I will make sure Sarah has what she needs. I’ll even provide recipes if she needs them.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Samuel and Trent don’t need to stay here. I think it would be best if they stay in the hotel in

Green Valley,” Kent said before Lottie could say a word.

“Green Valley is too far away for them to drive back and forth,” Mary said, her eyes still on Lottie. “Charlotte, I’m sure you will be an excellent host while they are here. Since they are bringing their wives, you’ll have some women to talk with.”

Kent felt very frustrated and he wasn’t sure what he could do about it. He knew his mother was, in her roundabout way, trying to set up Lottie to fail.

He felt like his life was spiraling out of control. Before he could say anything, Kathy spoke up.

“Lottie, I know you and Kent have been working hard all day, but why don’t you show me what you did? It’s very hot in here, and I would love to get a breath of fresh night air.”

Lottie looked relieved and soon the two women were gone, leaving Kent with his parents.

Part of him wanted to follow his sister and his wife. But he also recognized that he needed to use this opportunity to have a frank discussion with his parents—he might as well do that while the women were not around to hear any harsh or criticizing words.

“Father, I wish you would just listen to me and allow me to go the direction I want to go in my life,” Kent said, determination in his voice. “You should not have invited these men to come without my knowledge, especially to my home.”

His father would have never done such a thing to his mother. If Grant ever had guests arriving in the city, he always made sure Mary felt comfortable with the idea of anyone staying at their

home before he extended the invitation.

“I know much more about running a business than you do,” his father reminded him. “We’re going to need investors for the mine, and I’m pleased Samuel and Trent are willing to take a look at it.”

“Then you need to allow Kathy to be part of this,” Kent said. “She’s doing a terrific job, and you won’t be disappointed if you just give her a chance.

“Don’t you remember how much she helped you with the finances with your businesses?”

“Running stores is very different from operating a mining business, as I’m sure you know,” Grant scoffed.

He looked at Mary. “I’m beginning to wish that we had kept these two in Denver where they belong.”

Mary didn’t say anything, but Kent could tell she agreed with her husband.

“But I felt good about this endeavor. We just need to work together. Besides, need I remind you that it is my money that bought this land?

“Since I own every inch of it, I could force you to get rid of all the cattle,” Grant pointed out. “I could make it so you have no way to be successful.”

With those words, Kent fell silent. All of the arguments and points he wanted to make to his father left his mind.

He was well aware that the success of his ranch currently hinged

on his father's support. His father was effectively backing him into a corner, and he had to agree.

Kent needed to play his part so that Samuel would agree to invest in the mine. But once the men left, he would continue working on the ranch and Kathy could continue her own plans.

If Samuel didn't invest, both his dreams and Kathy's would die.

As his father continued to talk, Kent barely heard the words. In the end, he found himself agreeing to his father's terms.

He would meet with the men and do what his father wanted him to, although he was definitely not happy about it. But maybe it would be a good decision in the long run.

Even if Father continued to insist that Kathy not be part of things, Kent might be able to point out everything she had been doing.

Lottie and Kathy slowly walked toward the far fields where a few of the cattle were grazing. Others were laying down, enjoying the shade.

Eagerly, Lottie showed her sister-in-law what she and Kent had done that day, starting with moving the cattle and then almost completing a fence around another field.

Kathy seemed impressed at how much they had accomplished. She laughed as Lottie described how Kent had wanted to move the cattle, on his feet instead of on Jack.

“I wish I could be more like you,” Kathy said with a sigh when Lottie fell silent.

“What do you mean?” Lottie asked. Why would a woman as beautiful as Kathy want to be like her?

“You knew the direction you wanted your life to go, and you took it,” Kathy said. “I don’t know if I would be brave enough to travel so far to marry a man I had never even met, except for writing a few letters.”

“Sometimes you have to do what you need to do in order to survive,” Lottie replied softly.

“Would you like some advice and tips on how to deal with my mother?” Kathy offered.

“That would be great,” Lottie agreed. “I have to admit that she intimidates me a bit.”

“I think it’s great that you stood up for Sarah,” Kathy told her. “Did you notice how Mother backed down when you did that?”

Lottie thought for a moment and then shook her head. “By that time I was too upset, I guess. Then I left the house after that.”

“For some reason, Mother likes to test people, to see how far she can go in pushing them to do what she wants them to do or act the way she wants them to act. You stood up for Sarah—you need to stand up for yourself, too.”

I don’t want to offend her or hurt her feelings,” Lottie tried to explain her reluctance. “After all, she does have the right to her opinion.”

Kathy shook her head. “She may act like you’re offending her, but you really aren’t. She admires women who are strong and capable and aren’t afraid to show those traits.”

“If that’s the case, why won’t she help you out in your desire to run the mine?”

“Because in her mind, there is men’s work and there is women’s work. Running a silver mine is a man’s job,” Kathy explained. “She can’t imagine herself ever wanting to do what I’m doing, so it

makes no sense to her.”

“And running a ranch is a man’s job,” Lottie said slowly. “She wants me to entertain her guests. Doesn’t she realize there is so much to do around here, and I’m not going to have time to do any entertaining?”

“The work isn’t going to stop just because we have guests. The horses and cattle still will need to be fed, the eggs gathered, the cow milked,” she pointed out.

“In her mind, entertaining the guests is more important than anything else, because whatever they decide will make or break the success of the mine.”

“Or they could just let you go forward with your plans,” Lottie said and then continued before Kathy could add her thoughts. “But I understand that to them, you aren’t doing anything productive.”

“What you need to do is sit down with Sarah and come up with a detailed plan. What meals she should prepare, how she should prepare guest rooms for them.

“You don’t have to do the work—you just have to make sure it gets done,” Kathy advised her. “In fact, this is a really good opportunity for Sarah to show us what she is capable of.”

“And what if your mother tries to intervene?” Lottie asked, voicing what she was afraid would happen.

Mary could make the situation awful for Sarah. Then Sarah might decide that having a job wasn’t worth the headache she was being forced to deal with and quit.

“She won’t.” Kathy grinned. “She wants *you* to fail.”

Lottie snorted, not liking her words, but she knew Kathy was right. Mary had basically admitted it.

“That makes sense,” she said slowly and then grinned back. “I would much rather just not worry about it, though. I’m sure Sarah can handle things just fine.”

“If you are able to make sure that their guests’ needs are met, even though Sarah will be the one doing the work, it will impress my mother,” Kathy assured her.

By this time, they had walked from the house and to the fields. They passed the herd of cattle and soon were on part of the ranch that Lottie hadn’t seen yet.

She gasped in amazement of the beauty in front of her. There was a large pond with a wooded area beside it. A variety of birds were enjoying the calm water, including a mother duck and six ducklings.

From a nearby tree, a crow called out a warning that its paradise had been invaded. A doe with a spotted fawn had been enjoying a drink when Lottie and Kathy arrived and they bounded into the trees, soon disappearing toward the mountains.

When Kathy confessed that she had also hadn’t had a chance to look around this part of the land, the two women spent a few minutes exploring. They began to walk around the pond.

Part of the ground near the water was swampy and insects flew ahead of them as they walked. Lottie could hear a chorus of frogs croaking and a large splash in the middle of the pond suggested

there were fish in it.

She knew right away this would be her most favorite place on the ranch. This was where she would come when she needed some time to think.

A small bubbly river fed the pond and Lottie suspected this flowed into the stream that wound through the ranch, providing plenty of water for the cattle. They just needed to figure out an effective way to get it to the other parts of the property.

She was glad she got along so well with Kent's twin sister. In a way, talking with Kathy brought back so many memories of her own sister, Ellen. She remembered the many times they talked as they worked on the farm.

Even though Ellen had been two years older than her, they were remarkably alike. They both had enjoyed being outdoors and working in the factory had been a difficult adjustment for Ellen.

Lottie remembered seeing her sister slowly become quieter and quieter the longer she had worked there. At one point, she had made a suggestion that Ellen try to find another job, one that wouldn't make it so she had to be indoors for so many hours.

But Ellen had refused, saying she needed to help and do her part. Two weeks later, she was killed.

Lottie missed her sister so much and tears began to run down her cheeks. She tried to wipe them away so that Kathy wouldn't notice, but she was too late.

"What's wrong? Please don't take the way my mother treats you personally. She will get used to this new situation, eventually,"

Kathy said, worry in her eyes.

Lottie shook her head. 'It's not that. I'm just thinking of my sister.'

"Oh, I'm sure you miss her," Kathy said as she tucked her arm through Lottie's. "In fact, I'm sure you miss all of your family. Maybe you can invite them to come visit, once things settle around here."

Lottie shook her head. "She won't be able to because..." She paused, not wanting to say the words. This was the first time she had verbally told someone what had happened to her sister.

"She died a few months ago," Lottie finally managed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Kathy responded as she drew Lottie into a hug. The sympathy Kathy displayed made the tears come faster and for a moment, Lottie allowed herself to grieve. "What happened?"

In as few words as possible, she quickly told Kathy what happened to Ellen and her mother, and the repercussions of the factory fire. She explained how her father had insisted that he sell their farm, which made her answer Kent's ad.

When she finished her story, she discovered that she actually felt better. Kathy was a great listener and she was grateful that Kent's sister had so willingly accepted her.

It was nice to talk to someone about the loss of her sister and mother, something she'd been trying to ignore for so long now.

"Does Kent know about this?" Kathy asked.

Lottie nodded. "I told him in my third letter. He wanted to know

the reason I was so willing to be a mail-order bride.

“I think he was a bit relieved, if I’m honest. I don’t have a strong tie to my family that might have kept me from coming here.”

Kathy immediately stood up for her brother. “Did he actually write that?”

“No,” Lottie admitted, “but he never said anything to me about it.”

“He probably just didn’t know what to say. He is a man, after all. I think my brother has strong feelings for you,” Kathy said.

“What do you mean, strong feelings?”

“As in, he’s falling in love with you,” Kathy replied with a delighted smile.

“Why do you say that?” Lottie asked curiously as she wiped the last of her tears away. “We’ve only been married for a few days. I don’t think there has been enough time for that to happen.”

She knew Kent liked her, but it was too soon to have strong feelings between them. She remembered the stories her mother had told her and Ellen about her courtship with their father.

While her father had shown interest in her mother, it had taken her six months to agree to be courted and another year before she realized that she loved him enough to get married. Her parents had had a deep love for each other, but it had grown slowly and over time.

That love had been a big reason why her father hadn’t been able to move on after her death and why he had sold the farm. He hadn’t

wanted to live there without his wife.

When Lottie decided to be a mail-order bride, she had done so with the hope that she would at the very least find a man she could respect and enjoy being around, and she did have that with Kent.

He had already shown great respect toward her and she did enjoy working with him. But strong feelings? It was too soon.

“I know because of the letters you exchanged,” Kathy replied, breaking through her thoughts.

“He let you read them?” Lottie asked in disbelief, not sure how she felt about that.

“Not all of them, just the first two. But I saw his reaction when one of your letters would arrive. I could tell he was impressed with you. And since you’ve arrived, I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

Lottie just shrugged, sure that Kathy was just seeing what she wanted to see. But if that was true and Kent did have strong feelings for her, she wished his parents would see what Kathy had already noticed.

She shouldn’t care what Mary and Grant thought of her. After all, she had agreed to marry their son, not them. But deep down, she did care very much.

The next morning, Kent was actually awake before Lottie was. Together, they took care of the morning chores, ate Sarah's delicious breakfast, and then went out to saddle Lady and Jack.

Lottie had come up with an idea to teach Kent how to herd the cattle with Jack, and she wanted to give it a try.

They'd had very little interaction with Mary and Grant that morning, and after breakfast, the two of them headed into town to meet the train that would bring their guests to Green Valley.

When she had returned from her walk with Kathy the evening before, Lottie had spent over an hour with Sarah helping her plan what meals she would make, as well as how to prepare the guest rooms.

Throughout, Lottie had apologized a number of times for putting Sarah into a position where she had to assume responsibilities that she hadn't been hired to do.

"It's fine," Sarah had finally said at one point, "I don't mind. I'm actually looking forward to doing this."

“And don’t worry about the meals,” she added. “I enjoy trying to come up with new recipes. I promise your guests will be impressed.”

Sarah’s words had reassured Lottie and she felt confident in allowing Sarah to continue forward, with the promise that she could have a day off after the guests left to make up for the extra work.

After breakfast, Lottie and Kent went to the field where the cattle were, and she easily was able to divide about ten of them away from the herd, with Lady’s help. She moved them into the old field and spent the next few hours showing Kent how to move them from one spot to another.

She was pleased that Jack also did well once he understood what he was supposed to do. In fact, he seemed to be even doing better than Lady.

While Lady did the work willingly enough, Lottie could tell her heart wasn’t in it. She hesitated too often when Lottie gave her a command.

Kent took to herding quickly, and at one point Lottie moved her horse off to the side and let her husband gather the cattle on his own. But instead of watching him with the cattle, she stared at him.

He was absolutely the most handsome man she had ever seen. She loved how comfortable he looked on the back of Jack.

His blond hair was getting long, and it blew in the Nevada breeze as he worked. He’d lost his hat a few times and eventually just left it off, hooking it over a fence post.

A large smile split his face, showing his delight in being able to move the cattle from one end of the field to another. This lifestyle clearly agreed with him—he absolutely loved what he was doing.

Part of Lottie wished Grant could see how happy Kent was at this moment, but it wouldn't make a difference. Grant had other plans for his son.

When Lottie could tell that the cattle had enough and were growing tired, they moved them back with the rest of the herd and once again she allowed Kent to do most of the work.

“Shall we finish the fence?” Lottie asked when they completed the job.

Kent hesitated and didn't answer, but he did look off into the distance toward the mountains.

“Or was there something else we need to do?” Lottie questioned.

“There is something I have been wanting to check on. I would like to find the water source in the stream that runs to the pond and then through the ranch.”

“That's actually a good idea,” Lottie agreed. “I'm sure it's coming from the mountains, though. I don't know if we have time today because of your father's guests coming this afternoon. It's already almost lunchtime.”

“I think it'll be fine if we ride up there at least a little ways,” Kent urged.

Lottie shrugged. The idea of spending more time alone with Kent excited her, but she didn't want him to get in trouble with his

parents.

The last thing Grant had said to Kent before he left for Green Valley was to make sure he was at the house by mid-afternoon.

At the same time, Lottie didn't like how Grant and Mary were dictating what they should do. It probably wouldn't hurt to ride into the mountains at least a little bit.

If they couldn't find the water source, they could try another day.

"Let's do it."

Kent grinned at her.

They began to follow the stream and soon passed the pond. The stream grew wider as it got closer to the mountains, until it became what Lottie would call a river.

As they rode next to each other, they talked, keeping the horses at a slow trot. Kent told her again of his plans for the ranch.

This time, she could picture it herself, now that she had seen the lay of the land. She could easily see this becoming the most successful cattle ranch in the area.

They would need to purchase more land, of course, and hire cowboys to work for them.

There were a few times when he asked her advice about something. Sometimes, when she made a comment, he would ask her to expound on it.

For the first time, she realized she was very glad her father had

insisted on selling the farm in Maine. If she had stayed there, trying to keep the farm going with her father, they would have always been struggling.

There was no way to purchase more land in Maine since everything around them had been taken. They'd only had enough land to do so much.

Here in Nevada, it seemed like there was so much opportunity. There was enough grass to feed a herd the triple the size Kent now had.

As they rode along the river, it continued to grow wider, indicating that they had access to plenty of water. Although Kent did point out that the mine needed to use some of it.

When they reached the base of the mountains, Kent urged Jack up a dirt path that led into the forest and Lady followed. Glancing at the sun, Lottie could tell that it was after noon.

She almost pointed the time out to Kent, but she didn't. She wanted to explore the mountains as much as he did, and she soon forgot all about his parents and their preconceived expectations.

They continued to ride deeper into the mountains and she was in awe at how beautiful they were. An hour later, she found herself sitting on Lady, next to Kent on the top of a cliff.

Looking over the edge, she could see a perfect view of the ranch.

It seemed like she could see into forever. The cattle looked like black ants in the field. She could see the house and barn and even Kathy's small cabin.

Green Valley sat in the far distance. Just below them, the river wound through a canyon it had carved centuries ago and disappeared into the rugged mountains.

Lottie was beginning to wonder if the river would ever end.

She was so enthralled in the beauty around her that she didn't notice Kent get off Jack and tie him to a tree branch until he touched her knee.

"Let's walk around," Kent suggested.

She allowed Kent to help her to the ground and secured Lady next to Jack. He took her hand and they began to walk along the edge of the cliff.

Cool wind hit her face and she closed her eyes to let the sun's rays warm her soul.

"I could stay here forever," she murmured, her eyes still closed.

Kent was glad Lottie had agreed to come up the mountains with him. He knew he should have stuck around since his parents' guests would be arriving in a few hours, but he did want to find out about the water source.

So far, they'd had plenty of water on the ranch, and he wanted to make sure it wasn't going to go dry in the middle of summer. It was one thing that Kent had been happy about when he first saw this land, the amount of water that was available.

As they moved deeper into the mountains, it was increasingly clear to him that they really didn't have time to find where the river was coming from. He wondered if it was streaming from a lake possibly located in the tops of the mountains that was fed from winter snow.

If that was the case, it would take longer than a few hours to get there. But they had stopped in this beautiful area and he wished they could just stay for the rest of the day.

The stress his father was causing seemed to slowly disappear. He needed to figure out a way to stand up to him; he just didn't know how.

Kent was surrounded by God's beauty with the bright blue sky and the green trees and plants around him. He could hear the river rushing below them and see the ranch in the distance.

But he couldn't keep his eyes off of the beautiful woman beside him.

Her eyes were closed as she tilted her face to the sun with a contented smile. The light breeze blew her blond hair, strands of it tickling her rosy cheeks.

For the first time, he noticed that they both had blond hair, almost the same color, and he knew her eyes were as blue as his own. He wondered if others around them would think they were siblings, but what he felt for her was definitely not brotherly.

He loved how she showed her emotions so readily around him. Everything she did, she did with enthusiasm and delight. She wasn't afraid to show him what she knew while also teaching him.

She seemed to have jumped right into her new life with him without any reservations or remorse of the life she left behind in Maine.

She got along with Kathy and handled the situation with Sarah well. The only people she was quiet and withdrawn around were his parents, which saddened him.

When he'd first placed the ad, it was mainly with the idea that he would find a woman who would want to help him get the ranch started. And Lottie was doing exactly that.

He'd just never thought he might begin to have feelings for his new wife.

He had hoped they would be friends and have respect between them. But a strong swelling of emotion flooded his chest as he continued to watch her.

Lottie opened her eyes that were as blue as the sky and smiled at him. Her joy lit up her face, letting him know that she was enjoying this moment with him, at the top of this cliff.

He'd been taught since he was a young boy that his father had the last word in their family. Even his mother deferred to Grant about almost everything—she might give her opinion, but in the end she did what her husband wanted.

Kent watched as Lottie lifted her face to the sun, as if she was enjoying its warmth. She was nothing like his mother. She wasn't afraid to tell him exactly what she thought.

He figured out the day after their marriage that Lottie knew a lot more than he did about taking care of cattle. But that was one of the main reasons he married her.

He had known a few women who were quite demanding and bossy with their husbands, but Lottie did a good job explaining how to do things, without coming across like she was better than him.

And she acted like she enjoyed being with him. She loved this kind of life, like she was made for it, spending the day on the back of a horse with the Nevada wind in her hair.

Without thinking, Kent tugged Lottie toward him and she went willingly, a question in her eyes. Keeping her hand in his, he used his other hand to brush the stray curls from her face.

Her breath caught at his touch. Whatever was developing between

them, it was clear that Lottie felt it, too.

“Why don't we eat lunch here?” Lottie suggested, interrupting his thoughts.

Kent was confused. “Do we have food to eat?”

She grinned. “Sarah gave me a bag with our lunch before I left this morning. I think she probably knew we didn't want to come back until we absolutely had to.”

“I'll have to thank her profusely when we get home,” Kent said, suddenly feeling very hungry.

Lottie opened up the bag that hung behind Lady's saddle and took out a wrapped package. Kent hadn't even known there was anything inside the bag.

She handed the package to him and then spent a few minutes making sure Lady's reins were tied securely to a low-hanging branch. He carefully carried the food over to another tree.

They both made themselves comfortable against the trunk and he unwrapped the meal. Sarah had made thick beef sandwiches, and had added a couple apples, sliced carrots, and what looked like oatmeal cookies for dessert. He said a short prayer over the food, and they began to eat.

“I have to admit I'm glad Sarah is working for us,” Lottie said.

“I wasn't very happy that your mother hired her, but she is a godsend. She definitely knows how to cook and she's doing a great job of keeping the house clean.”

"I agree," Kent replied as he took a bite out of his apple.

They were silent for a few minutes as they ate. The beef sandwich tasted so good, he was glad Sarah had packed several. He picked up another.

"I wish we could come up here every day," Kent confessed. "These mountains are absolutely magical."

"I wish we could, too," Lottie said. "I do enjoy working on the ranch, though, especially with you. Maybe this area could be our special spot, a place we can go to when we want to get away..."

She paused and didn't finish her sentence. Kent noticed that her face was flushed and she wouldn't look at him.

"I know what you're going to say. When we want to get away from my parents," he finished gently.

"I understand they can go a bit overboard. Hopefully after these guests of theirs leave, they'll head back to Denver."

"I don't feel like they are respecting our wishes. They shouldn't have invited those guests to come and stay with us without asking us first," Lottie said.

She didn't look at him, but kept her eyes on her hands that twisted in her lap.

"I know, and once this is all over, I'm planning on having a long talk with my parents. But there's nothing we can do about it now," he responded.

He did understand that Lottie wasn't used to the way his parents

handled problems: head on, while expecting those around them to do exactly what they wished, no questions asked.

Kent was so used to it, he found himself automatically obeying. But he also was beginning to see that he needed to set some boundaries between him and his parents.

“Are you going to go to the mine with his guests like your father is insisting?” she asked.

Kent shrugged and didn’t answer. He knew he would be doing what his father wanted.

He wished he was strong enough to stand up to him with this particular problem, but a lot of money had been invested in the mine. He didn’t want it to fail, even if it wasn't something he wanted to do.

Besides, if the mine didn't do well, then he would also lose the ranch. He needed to figure out a way to get his father to agree to let Kathy show him what she could do with the mine, instead of him.

His father’s demands were not only affecting Kent and his plans for the ranch, but his sister’s desires, as well.

“Let's go up a little farther,” Kent suggested when they were finished with their lunch, trying to delay their return home even longer.

“Kent, I don't think we’re going to find where this river is coming from, at least not today,” Lottie pointed out.

“I know, but I'd like to keep going if we can, just for another hour

or so.”

Without saying anything else, Lottie got on her horse and Kent did the same.

They continued up into the mountains until the brush was so thick that the horses could go no farther. The ground was getting rocky and they were having a hard time finding a safe place to step.

“We better get back,” Lottie said, regret in her voice. She clearly didn’t want to head home any more than he did.

It took almost an hour to carefully go down the mountain to the bottom. For most of the way, the horses had a hard time finding solid places to step because of loose rocks.

If they did come back to search for the water source, they would need to do it on foot, unless Kent could find a different way to get up the mountain.

They finally made it to the bottom and urged the horses toward the ranch. Judging from the sun’s position in the sky, it was almost dinnertime.

They had missed the arrival of his parents’ guests. His father was not going to be happy, but it couldn’t be helped now.

“Oh no,” Lottie said as she stared straight ahead for a moment. Then she kicked her heels into her horse’s flank, urging Lady to go faster.

“What’s wrong?” Kent called, as Jack began to follow Lady.

Then he saw what had Lottie so concerned. Most of the cattle had

gotten out of the field they'd been in, and they were all over the place. Only a few cows were left in the field.

Somehow, they must've forgotten to close the gate to the field that morning. Lottie had instructed him to do it, and he tried to remember if he had done so.

He thought he remembered looping the wire over the post, but obviously he hadn't. The sight before him was a good sign that the gate hadn't been closed properly.

"We've got to get them back into the field as soon as possible," Lottie said urgently. "I just hope we can find all of them."

"How do we do that?" Kent asked, ready to do his part.

"The way I showed you a few days ago. Use Jack to help herd the cattle together."

Kent did his best, trying to remember all the instructions Lottie had given him. But when they had done this a few days ago, the cattle had been willing to stay together.

And he had only been trying to move ten cows at the same time, not an entire herd of them.

Now it seemed like they were all enjoying their newfound freedom. None of them were eager to get back where they belonged.

The sun was starting to set by the time they were able to get the last cow into the field. Kent closed the gate behind them, making sure that this time, it was secure.

"There are a few more over there," Lottie called out.

Kent looked in the direction Lottie was pointing at and saw three cows under some large bushes, contently resting. Lottie headed over. She was doing most of the work.

Kent felt useless, though he was doing his best to help. When he saw those cows, he decided it would be his job to get them back where they belong, not Lottie's.

He urged Jack into a gallop. But it didn't take long for the cows to figure out that their freedom was almost at its end and they took off, in the opposite direction of where they should be.

One of the cows ran right in front of him, spooking his horse. Jack lunged in the air and Kent fell out of the saddle, landing on his left side. Pain shot through his leg as something sharp dug into it.

"Kent, are you okay?" Lottie asked frantically. She slid off Lady and came running toward him. "Kent, answer me." He could hear fear in her voice, and he wondered what she could see that he didn't.

Kent tried to answer her, but he was in too much pain. As Lottie reached his side, she slid in the mud and dropped to her knees.

"Oof," Lottie grunted. "Darn it."

He watched through a haze of pain as she tried to brush off the mud on her skirt, but only succeeded in spreading it all over her hands.

"Are you okay?" Lottie asked again.

"I think so," Kent was finally able to respond. "My leg hurts like the dickens, though."

Lottie did her best to wipe off the mud that was on her hands on her skirt and then focused on his leg. Kent tried to get up on his elbows to see why it was hurting so bad.

He couldn't tell what was wrong, only that there was a lot of bleeding. Lottie ran a hand over both legs and then breathed a sigh of relief.

"I don't think anything is broken. Let's see if we can get you on Lady."

"Why not Jack?" Kent looked around but didn't see his horse anywhere.

"He took off toward the barn, so you're going to have to ride Lady. Let's get you home."

"What about the cows?"

Lottie glanced at them. "Hopefully they don't go anywhere, but there's nothing we can do about them right now. It's getting dark and I want to get you in the house."

He couldn't think of anything else to stall the inevitable. He would need to stand, somehow get on Lady, and make Lottie walk back to the house.

Lottie did her best to help Kent to his feet. He could walk, but he groaned with pain. It took a few minutes to get him on the horse.

Lottie grasped the reins and began the slow walk toward the house. Neither of them said anything.

Because they needed to move so slowly, it took almost thirty minutes until they finally arrived at the house. She tried to keep the tears at bay. She was so worried about Kent.

He looked pale and he seemed to be sweating too much. She was afraid he was going to faint from the trauma of his injury and loss of blood and fall off Lady.

If that happened, she didn't know if she would be able to get him home, not without help. They'd had such a perfect day together, and then this happened.

"I'm going to go inside and get some help," Lottie said, trying to keep her voice calm when what she wanted to do was yell.

"Help me down first," Kent said with a groan.

It took another five minutes to get Kent off the horse and sitting on the porch stairs. She looped Lady's reins around the porch railing.

She wished she could see how bad Kent's leg was, but it was already almost dark. They needed to get him inside and she could take care of him then.

Inside the house, something smelled delicious. Because she had helped Sarah plan out the menu that morning, Lottie knew she was smelling a beef roast with mashed potatoes and gravy, carrots and peas, and rolls.

Sarah had also planned on making apple pie for dessert. Lottie's stomach growled at the wonderful scents, but she knew it was going to be a while before she could eat any of it.

She could hear voices of men speaking to each other—Kent's parents and their guests were eating dinner. She didn't want to interrupt them but Kent needed help getting into the house, so she hurried into the kitchen.

“What in the world?” Mary practically shrieked when she saw her.

Lottie felt confused for a moment. Mary was looking at her like she didn't recognize her. Her eyes darted to the bottom of Lottie's clothing and then to her hands.

She looked down at her dress and groaned when she saw how dirty it was. Dried mud fell off her dress onto the clean floor.

There was a large tear in her left sleeve and another on the skirt of her dress. Her hair was probably hanging halfway down her back, and not in the proper braid she'd put it in that morning.

“Who is this?” one of the women asked, disdain in her voice.

“Kent's hurt,” Lottie said, getting to the reason she was there.

She knew how important proper introductions were with people who were part of the elite crowd but there wasn't time for all of that.

“I need some help getting him inside and we need to send for the doctor.” She turned around and left the kitchen, hoping that at least some of them would follow her.

She heard one of the guests ask, “Is that your daughter-in-law?”

“I'm afraid it is,” Mary responded in a tight, disapproving voice. “I'll have you know that Kent married her without our approval.”

It didn't surprise Lottie that Mary felt that way, but hearing those words hurt and her chest clenched tightly. Pushing the tears and the pain aside, she went to the porch to check on Kent.

She needed to focus on him and not the hurtful words of his mother. She was glad when Grant and the other two men followed her.

Grant's eyes widened as he looked at his son, and Lottie hoped these men would be able to get Kent to his room without worrying about getting dirt on their fancy suits.

She paused at the doorway and watched as they carefully and gently laid him on the bed. As they stepped away from Kent, she moved to his side, but hesitated as she tried to decide where she could sit without causing him pain.

“I’ll get your chair, Mrs. Golightly,” one of the men offered and disappeared before she could say anything.

He appeared a few moments later, one of the kitchen chairs in his hands. He set the chair near Kent and she sank into it gratefully.

Grant had been enjoying the meal the maid had prepared for the guests. The food was quite simple, nothing like the cook could have prepared for them in Denver.

Still, it was adequate, and his guests didn't seem to mind what they were eating. Mrs. Rodgers even complimented how light and fluffy the rolls were.

But Grant was upset that Kent hadn't been around when they arrived from Pine Valley, and had done his best to smooth over any concerns and questions about where his son was.

Mr. Trent Ferguson had wanted to go see the mine the moment they arrived, but Grant felt they should wait until the next morning. He didn't want to rush the tour with the sun going down.

Mrs. Rodgers had asked where Kent and Kathy were, and Mary came up with a simple excuse, saying that they were busy with various responsibilities and would be there for dinner, which seemed to appease the guests.

Then the dinner hour came, and neither of his children were around. He finally decided they would start eating without Kent

and Kathy.

Grant did his best to keep his anger in check but he was furious and humiliated that Kent hadn't yet arrived.

Dinner was half over when his daughter-in-law barged in. Grant almost didn't recognize her at first.

She'd looked like she belonged in an orphanage, with hair that desperately needed brushing falling around her face, twigs and grass threaded through it. She had a thin scratch on her cheek.

Mud and dirt dripped on the floor from the hem of her dress. He immediately noticed that Mr. Ferguson and his wife gave distasteful looks to Lottie and then him.

"Kent's been hurt," Lottie said, her voice letting everyone know that what she had to say was urgent. "We need to send for a doctor."

She quickly left after making her announcement.

Mrs. Ferguson's voice dripped with disgust. "Is that your daughter-in-law?"

"I'm afraid it is," Mary responded with a frown and a nod in his direction. "Kent married her without our approval."

Grant wanted to tell his guests that his wife was right, they hadn't approved of this marriage, but Samuel Rodgers was already standing and looked concerned.

"We'd better go help," he suggested.

Grant was sure this was just a small drama that Kent and Lottie had staged because they hadn't been here when they were supposed to.

He stifled a sigh and hurried outside to see what all the fuss was about. Samuel and Trent Ferguson followed him.

He only needed a glance to see that Kent really had been hurt. There was quite a bit of blood on his pants and Lottie was sitting next to him, trying to pull the fabric up to see how bad his injury was.

"I'll go get the doctor," Samuel offered.

"You can use my horse," Lottie said quickly with a wave toward a mare that was tied to a post. The horse was almost as dirty as Lottie was.

Grant was ready to tell Samuel he didn't need to run off, that maybe they should find out if a doctor really needed to come all the way out here, but Samuel was already on the back of Lottie's horse.

A few seconds later, he was galloping toward town, but not before he cast a concerned glance at Kent. Grant was going to have to do some major explaining when Samuel returned.

This was not what his guests had signed up for.

"Just get me inside," Kent said stiffly.

Lottie helped Kent to his feet while Grant hovered nearby, not sure what he could do. Trent gently pushed Lottie aside and Grant stepped in to help.

Between the two men, they were able to get Kent up to his room and on his bed. Trent gave Grant a sympathetic glance.

"I'll leave you alone." He disappeared down the stairs.

After Trent left, Grant looked at his son and he grew more and more angry. Lottie was fussing, again trying to get a look at his leg. She had found a pair of scissors and began cutting his pants off.

She gasped when the fabric was finally cut from the wound. Grant looked at what Lottie was upset about and his eyes widened.

Kent had what looked to be at least an eight-inch long wound and it looked deep. Dirt and grass had mixed with dried blood.

He was glad Samuel had gone to get the doctor. Kent would need some stitches.

"I'll go get something to clean this up with," Lottie said and hurried from the room.

Since it was just him and Kent in the room now, Grant could not keep silent any longer. "What in the world happened?"

"The cows got out and we are trying to get them back into the field," Kent said with a groan. "My horse got spooked when a cow ran in front of us and he threw me to the ground."

"This would've never happened if you had been here like you were supposed to be," Grant thundered. "Imagine my surprise when we got back from Pine Valley and you were nowhere to be found."

"Why can't you have just taken over the mine like you were supposed to do? I can't believe how reckless you're being with your

future.”

“Father,” Kent began, but Grant glared at him. His son was going to listen to what he had to say.

“As you can tell, ranching isn't for you. Look what happened?” He waved a hand toward his son's leg. “You got injured just because you were trying to chase after a dirty cow.

“Why did you do something so reckless? Don't you know what you're doing? You're trying to ruin the business I've been working so hard to get started for you.”

Grant paced back and forth as he talked. “I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Samuel and Trent refuse to have anything to do with the mine now, especially after what they have just seen with you and your wife.

“I was counting on you to help represent our family name, but I can see it doesn't look like you're going to be able to handle that responsibility. If you don't step up to what you should be doing, you're going to force me to look at other options. We need investors for the mine to be successful.”

Only having his wife step into the room with a handful of bandages and towels made Grant stop. He glanced at Kent for the first time since he started his tirade, and noticed how pale his son looked.

His eyes were closed and his lips pinched tightly in pain. But Grant didn't regret any of the words he'd just said.

He didn't want to ruin his relationship with his only son, but he had worked too hard to let this business fall apart just because

Kent wanted to sow some wild oats.

Lottie entered the room behind Mary, holding a large bowl of steaming water. She glared at him, but didn't say anything as she sat down on the bed.

She took one of the bandages Mary held and put it in the water, then she squeezed out the warm liquid and began to carefully clean Kent's wound.

It was then that Grant saw how bad Kent's injury really was. It started to bleed again as Lottie tried to clean it, and he thought he could see a bone.

Mary also saw it, made a small sound of distress, and hurried from the room. This didn't surprise Grant a bit—she hated the sight of blood and had actually fainted a few times in the past when she was around someone who had gotten injured.

Mary would spend a few minutes getting her emotions under control and then go talk to their guests. She always did what was expected of her.

He hoped she would be able to smooth things over.

Grant continued pacing back and forth as Lottie did her best to clean up Kent's leg. He wanted to keep yelling at his son, and try to get him to see the error of his ways.

But now was not the time to continue doing so. It was obvious Kent was in a lot of pain. When the doctor arrived, Grant stayed where he was, his arms crossed and a fierce frown on his face.

“Hello. What do we have here?” the doctor said in a cheerful voice.

“The man who came to get me said you might need stitches.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Kent groaned.

“I’m Dr. Martin, and I’ll have you fixed up in no time.” He began to probe the wound. “Did you clean this up, young lady?”

He looked at Lottie, who nodded. “I know it could be done better, but I’m so afraid to hurt him.”

“You did just fine. There’s not much more I need to do besides stitch him up.”

Lottie gave a sigh of relief and moved to Kent’s side. She clasped his hand and held it the entire time Dr. Martin stitched his leg up.

Grant wanted to tell Lottie to leave, that she didn’t need to baby Kent, but something kept him silent. He acted like he wanted to make sure Dr. Martin would do a good job, but he was looking at Lottie and Kent.

He could see how much Lottie cared for his son. At one point, she placed a wet rag on his forehead to blot the sweat away. Kent picked up her hand and kissed it.

The way they were acting, it just didn’t make sense to Grant. They had only been married for five days. How could they care so much for each other already? Or were they acting for his benefit?

“Okay, I’m done,” Dr. Martin announced. He began to clean up his supplies. “You’ll be fine in a few weeks.”

“Weeks?” Kent asked weakly.

“I suggest you stay off your leg for a few days. I’d say stay off for a week, but I doubt you’ll do that.” Dr. Martin said as he closed his black bag. He stood and clasped a hand on Kent’s shoulder.

“You will need to watch for infection, although I think it will heal just fine. But come and get me if you need to. I’ll come back in a few weeks to take out those stitches.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” Kent said as he shook his hand. “I appreciate that you came so quickly.”

“That’s my job,” Dr. Martin said as he turned to leave the room. “I’ll just let myself out.”

After Dr. Martin left, Mary again entered the room. “Grant, why don’t you come and finish your meal. Sarah has heated up everything again. Samuel and Trent like to talk with you.”

Those words made Grant nervous. He was sure the men had probably changed their minds about investing in the mine, all because his son didn’t do what he was told.

He turned and glared at Lottie. “This wouldn’t have happened if you had just stayed in Maine where you belong.”

Lottie looked at him with tears in her eyes. Without saying anything, she left the room.

“Lottie!” Kent called.

But she didn’t stop. Grant could hear her footsteps run down the stairs.

He felt a little bit of remorse for the harsh words he had just said

to her. But after a moment, he decided it was for the best. Maybe now she would go back to wherever she came from.

“Father...” Kent had turned his attention to Grant and there was intense anger on his face.

Grant looked away and left the room without responding. He would deal with his son later. Right now, he needed to do some damage control.

Lottie hurried down the stairs, tears streaming down her face.

She couldn't believe Grant had said those harsh things to her. She had also heard the hurtful things he had said to Kent.

She hadn't been eavesdropping; Grant had been yelling so loud at his son. She was embarrassed that their guests had heard everything, but there wasn't anything she could do.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw a stack of letters on a table. Her name was on one of them.

Grant and Mary must have picked up the mail that day when they were in town to retrieve their guests. She picked up the letter and then quietly left the house.

Not wanting to be too far from Kent, she sat on the rocking chair on the porch.

No matter how hard she tried, it seemed she would never be good enough for Kent's parents. It was obvious Grant pretty much hated her presence.

This was something she had never had to deal with in her life

before, having someone be so cruel to her. Would she ever be able to have a normal life here, being married to Kent?

She wasn't sure what was going to happen between Kent and his father. If Grant had his way, Kent would be running the mine exactly the way he wanted him to.

And if Kent made that choice, she wasn't sure what she would do.

She looked closer at the letter in her hand and recognized her father's handwriting. She had sent him a letter when she'd first arrived, letting him know that she had made it safely and was now a married woman.

She hadn't expected him to send a reply this quickly. Her father hadn't received much education when he was a boy, and writing letters was difficult for him.

He must have gotten someone to help him. She slowly opened it, wondering what he had to say.

Dear Lottie,

I received your letter saying that you made it to Nevada and are now married. But I feel I should let you know that things have changed here in Maine.

I am inviting you to come back home if things do not work out for you there. The farm, your childhood home, did not sell. The man who wanted to buy it was dishonest and did not have the funds he promised.

I have no desire to go back to the farm. I can try selling it again, but I keep thinking about how much you wanted to run the farm on your own, even though you're not a man.

I feel like I did a great disservice to you, to insist you get married instead of letting you work the land that has been in our family for generations. So, if you want it, the farm is yours.

Please let me know your decision as soon as possible.

Pa

Lottie had to read the letter through twice to make sure she actually understood what Pa was saying. This might be the answer to all of her problems.

She could go back home back to Maine and run the farm on her own. She could escape this madness and live a quiet, simple life.

Just then the door opened and Lottie almost hurried down the stairs and into the dark night. She didn't want to talk to any of Kent's family or their guests.

But it was Kent limping toward her.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she asked with concern. "The doctor said for you to stay off your leg for a few days so that it will heal properly."

"I couldn't stand knowing how upset you must be from my father's words," Kent said.

He was still in quite a bit of pain, judging from his pinched face. He limped toward her and Lottie stood, dropping her father's letter on the rocking chair.

"Let's get you back into bed and I'll sit by you until you fall asleep."

"I'm just fine. In fact..." Kent began, but she ignored whatever he wanted to say next and grasped his arm firmly.

She led him inside and helped him up the stairs, taking one step at a time, and he was soon settled in their bed.

"Come and sit beside me," Kent said as he patted the empty space.

Lottie made herself comfortable and Kent grasped her hand.

"I feel that I need to apologize for my father," Kent said. "I plan on talking to him in the morning and making sure that no matter how he feels about me, I will not allow him to demean you again, whether it is to me, to you, or behind our backs to others."

"It's okay," Lottie said.

"It's not," Kent said firmly. "You are my wife and no one has the right to talk to you the way he did."

Her husband's words settled in her soul. His eyes closed, and she knew he had to be exhausted. She cuddled beside him, doing her best to not touch his leg.

Then she thought of her father's letter. It was good to hear from him, and she felt bad the sale of the farm fell through, but she would write a letter to him in the morning and tell him she was staying with Kent.

Her place was at his side. She had married him for better or for worse.

They would deal with his parents together.

Kent put his arm around Lottie and pulled her close to him.

He was glad he had been able to find her so quickly.

When she ran out of the room, he had expected her to go to the barn where the horses were. While he hadn't needed to walk so far, he would have if he had needed to.

After he apologized for his father's words and behavior, Lottie hadn't said much, but he could see the intense sadness in her eyes.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I'm not sure your parents will ever be able to accept me as your wife," Lottie confessed.

"I think they will eventually," Kent replied. "But even if they don't, that doesn't change the fact that I love you."

A long minute of silence stretched between them. Kent held his breath, wondering how she would react to what he had just admitted.

"What did you say?" Lottie finally asked.

Kent smiled to himself, knowing exactly what she was asking. He decided to tease her a bit, to lighten things up between them.

“That I think my parents will accept you, eventually.”

“No, not that part.”

“I asked what you were thinking?” Kent said, biting his cheek to keep from laughing.

Lottie looked at him and must've seen the laughter in his eyes because she grinned. “No. I thought I heard you say...”

She didn't continue. Kent used a hand to tilt her chin so he could look in her eyes. “You heard me right. I just told you I love you.”

“I think I love you, too,” she said softly. When she looked at him, he could see all of her emotions in her eyes. What had he done to earn the right to have this wonderful woman as his wife?

Kent pressed his lips to hers. She immediately responded, and the next few minutes were silent as they showed each other how they felt.

Strong emotions flooded through Kent, making him realize that loving Lottie was better than he'd ever dreamed.

She curled up next to him and fell asleep. He kept his arm around her, absolutely thrilled that he had this wonderful woman in his life.

No matter what he had to deal with from his parents, they would handle it together, even if it meant he needed to give up the ranch.

There was one thing that he was beginning to recognize—the trials and problems they were going through were actually helping to bring them closer together.

Grant woke up early the next morning, listening intently to a strange sound just outside his bedroom door. He relaxed a bit when he realized Lottie had gotten up to take care of what she called the morning chores.

In his opinion, they were middle-of-the-night chores. It was still dark in the room, but he guessed the sun would begin to rise within the next hour.

He didn't understand why someone would want to get up so darn early. Couldn't the animals wait for another hour or two to be fed and cared for?

He tried to go back to sleep, but he began to think about everything that had happened the day before. Despite trying everything within his power, his plans for the mine had all fallen apart.

He'd lost out on a very profitable business deal because of Kent's so-called dreams. Samuel and Trent had spoken with him after the doctor had left, giving him their decision about investing in the mine.

They had left the ranch with their wives soon after the discussion, wanting to spend the night at a hotel and be on the train back to Denver the next morning.

Grant blamed Lottie for steering his son off course. He needed to figure out how to put a stop to this ranch business, once and for all.

Mary rolled over so that she was facing him. "Are you awake already?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Lottie woke me up leaving her room, and I can't get back to sleep," Grant whispered gruffly.

"Oh," she said, giving a deep sigh as her eyes closed.

Grant might as well get up. He didn't want to wake his wife up again with his tossing and turning. She had never been a morning person and liked to sleep in until mid-day if she could.

He slipped from the bed and quickly dressed before leaving the room. He walked down the stairs as quietly as he could and made his way into the kitchen, where he was pleased to see that Sarah was already up and beginning to prepare breakfast.

"Good morning, sir," Sarah said in a cheerful voice.

"Good morning," he said, trying to sound polite.

He wanted to put some of the blame that his business deal hadn't worked out on Sarah, but he grudgingly recognized that she had prepared a delicious meal. He hadn't agreed with Mary to hire this young woman, but despite a rough beginning, Sarah was doing quite well managing his son's household.

“Coffee is ready, if you’d like a cup,” she offered.

“That sounds good.”

He stayed where he was while Sarah continued to mix something in a bowl. She glanced at him a minute later, questions in her eyes as to why he was just standing there.

She must have gotten his unspoken message because her face flushed. She stopped what she was doing, picked up a mug, and poured the dark liquid into it before handing it to him.

“Here you go, sir,” she said formally.

Grant stifled a smile and took a sip. “Thank you.”

It always worked when he did this with his hired help in Denver. Sometimes, instead of verbally telling them what he wanted them to do, he would make a comment and then wait.

They were usually able to figure out what he wanted without any more instructions. It obviously worked with Sarah, which showed that she was an intelligent young woman.

He left the kitchen with the intent to enjoy his coffee in the parlor, but instead decided to sit outside on the porch. He stepped out and leaned against a post as he took another sip.

He had to admit that this was a beautiful area. He had chosen well when he’d added this piece of land when purchasing the mine.

He had done so to keep other developers as far from the mine as possible. He certainly hadn’t expected Kent to convert the land into a ranch.

The door opened and Kent appeared. He looked surprised when he saw Grant.

He waited for his son to greet him, but Kent kept his face carefully blank, turned away, and began to limp down the porch stairs.

“Where are you going?” Grant asked.

“I’m not about to let Lottie do the morning chores on her own,” Kent explained.

“I thought the doctor told you to stay off your leg for a full week,” he reminded his son.

Frustration filled him. Couldn’t Kent do at least one thing he was told? What if he injured himself even more?

“I’ll be careful.”

Grant scowled at Kent’s back as he moved slowly toward the barn, but short of dragging his son back to his bed, he couldn’t do anything.

Kent was angry with him, but once he began to work in the mine, he would realize that Grant had been right all along—that this was what he was supposed to be doing to secure his future, not raising a bunch of smelly cows.

He swallowed the last of his coffee and was ready to go back inside when he saw something sitting on a nearby rocking chair. Curious, he picked it up.

From what he could tell, it was a letter, but he couldn’t read the words. He stepped inside, went into Kent’s office, and lit a lamp.

Holding the letter close to the light, he began to read. By the time he was done, he was pleased with this new development.

It was a letter to Lottie from her father. Apparently, their family farm hadn't sold, and he was giving her a chance to return to Maine and take over the operation.

Grant smiled. This was an answer to his prayers, his chance to remove Lottie from Kent.

If he read between the lines, he suspected Lottie had wanted to work the farm before she'd traveled across the country to marry Kent, but her father had refused to let her, and rightly so.

Grant was a firm believer that women weren't meant to work like men. But it didn't matter to him if Lottie took her father up on his offer.

An idea began to form in his head. He listened intently to see if Lottie and Kent had returned, but all was quiet in the house, except for the soft sounds of Sarah still fixing breakfast.

He found a piece of paper, pen, and ink and began to write. Pretending to be Lottie, he told her father that she was thrilled he wanted her to run the farm.

She wasn't happy with her new life and wanted to come home. She would write again when her plans to leave were in place.

Grant did his best to sign her name in a flourish, like a woman would. He hoped Mr. Pelletier wouldn't realize the writing wasn't Lottie's.

He slid the letter into an envelope and wrote Mr. Pelletier's address

on the front. He would go into town that morning and mail it.

He hoped her father would quickly respond and then Grant could get Lottie on the next available train. Having Lottie gone would give Kent a chance to start over, to run the family business like he should have been doing all along.

There was a loud knock on the front door and Grant ignored it since it was Sarah's job to answer it. A few seconds later, the knock sounded again.

He sighed, figuring he might as well see who was there. Maybe Samuel or Trent changed their minds and wanted to talk to him again.

But it wasn't his business friends. The foreman he'd hired to help Kent with the mine was on the other side, Riley Guthrie.

"Riley?" he asked, surprised. Why wasn't the foreman at the mine?

Riley looked relieved when he saw Grant. "Is Kathy here?"

Grant shook his head. "I don't think so. What's going on?"

He was aware that Riley worked closely with his daughter, something he didn't approve of. He didn't like that the foreman was asking for her instead of himself or Kent.

"There are big problems at the mine. I need to find Kathy and I guess you had better come, too," Riley said after taking a deep breath.

Grant saw a horse standing nearby, its reins touching the ground. Riley had clearly pushed the horse hard, considering how hard the

animal was breathing.

“Give me a minute and I can leave,” Grant said. He glanced at the letter in his hand and decided he could mail it tomorrow.

Riley shook his head. “I need to find Kathy and get back to the mine. I’ll meet you there.”

Grant wanted to demand Riley wait for him, and demand to know exactly what was going on. But Riley was already getting on his horse.

Something serious must have happened for Riley to not want to wait.

Grant slid the letter under a small stack of other correspondence on a table near the door and then hurried out toward the barn, hoping Kent would have a horse he could use.

He couldn’t get one thing out of his mind. If Riley had come looking for his daughter, where was she?

Kent walked away from his father, doing his best to not limp. He hated to show any weakness around Grant, but his leg was already burning in pain.

He knew he should be in bed, but he didn't want Lottie to have to do all the work by herself.

It was his fault that he had gotten injured, after all. He hadn't been able to control Jack well enough when the cow ran in front of him.

When he made it to the barn, he stepped inside and saw Lottie milking the cow. She turned around, obviously hearing his footsteps, and frowned.

"What are you doing up?"

"I want to help," Kent said firmly.

"You should be back in bed," she said, scowling at him. "In fact..."

She stopped whatever she was going to say when she saw the determination on his face. He was going to help no matter what she said, and she knew it..

“What needs to be done?” he asked, glad she wasn’t going to argue with him.

“I haven’t mucked out the stalls or gathered the eggs,” she answered and turned back to the milking.

Kent grabbed a shovel and walked slowly to the back of the barn. He led Jack out of his stall, glad to see that someone had taken care of him when he’d left Kent laying in the dust.

Once Jack and Lady were in a nearby field, Kent began to clean the stalls.

Lottie joined him a few minutes later and with her help, the job went much faster. When the stalls were cleaned, they left the barn and headed to the chicken coop.

Kent scattered feed for the birds while Lottie gathered eggs in a basket. By the time this chore was done, Kent was moving very slowly.

His leg was throbbing and he didn’t know if he could do much more. He had pushed himself too hard.

“I can tell that you’re in pain, Kent,” Lottie said. “Go back to bed, please.”

“I don’t want you to do everything on your own,” Kent answered.

“I’ll be fine,” Lottie responded. “It’s not a problem, I promise. I’d rather you take care of that wound than push yourself. You could open up the stitches and make it worse.”

Kent had to admit that his wife had a point. It wouldn’t do any

good if the doctor had to come back out to fix what he repaired the night before.

Maybe it would be better if he stayed off his leg, at least for a few days.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let me take that basket of eggs inside, at least.”

Lottie gave him the basket. He was limping back to the house when he saw his father hurrying toward him.

He groaned, not wanting to have another run-in with Grant. Judging from the concerned look on his face, his father was upset about something.

“I need a horse,” Grant demanded. “Riley just stopped by and said there are problems at the mine and my presence is needed. Do you have one I can use?”

Kent pointed to the field where Lady and Jack were. “You can use Jack. Lottie can help you saddle him.”

“I can do it myself,” Grant muttered as he strode by him.

Kent continued his slow walk to the house, but he smiled slightly at his father’s words.

Grant rarely saddled his own horses, and always expected the man he’d hired to take care of his yard in Denver to do it when he needed one. In fact, he rarely rode horses, preferring to use a carriage.

There was a part of Kent who wanted to turn around to make sure

Grant didn't upset Lottie more than he'd already had, but his leg was hurting too bad. He was beginning to feel lightheaded and needed to lie down before he passed out.

Inside the house, he set the basket of eggs on the table near the door. In doing so, a stack of unopened letters fell to the floor.

He groaned and tried to bend down to pick them up, but pain shot through his leg, preventing him from doing so. Instead, he left them where they had fallen and slowly moved up the stairs.

In his room, he laid on his bed and kept his eyes closed, not wanting to move again. It took a while, but the intense pain finally left, now that he wasn't moving.

He felt so useless. What if his leg didn't heal properly, and he was no longer able to work on the ranch? He wondered if Lottie would want to continue to run the ranch if he continued to fail.

He thought of what his father had said to him when he needed a horse, that there was a problem at the mine. Whatever it was, he was sure Grant wasn't going to allow Kathy to help.

Maybe it would be better for him and for Lottie if he just accepted the inevitable and took over at the mine like his father wanted.

It was almost two hours later than it usually was when Lottie finally went inside for breakfast. It had taken her longer to do the morning chores, even with Kent helping for a while.

She wasn't happy that he had come out that morning, even though she understood that he wanted to do his part. But his leg needed

time to heal properly.

Then Grant had appeared, demanding a horse and indicating that Kent had told him he could ride Jack. Lottie had offered to help saddle the horse, although she was confused as to why he wanted to ride Jack in the first place.

Grant had refused her help and saddled the horse himself, although it had taken him twice as long as it would have if she had done it. She was relieved when he finally rode off in the direction of the mine. At least he hadn't said any harsh or criticizing words to her.

Once Grant was gone, Lottie continued the chores. She checked the stalls that Kent had tried to clean and noted that they needed to be done again, properly.

By the time she was done, she was exhausted and looking forward to a large breakfast.

She stepped inside the kitchen with the pail of milk. Breakfast was sitting on the stove to keep warm.

"Here's the milk," Lottie said to Sarah. "I'm sorry I couldn't get it in here until now."

"It's not a problem," Sarah replied as she began to strain the milk into a crock to be stored underground to stay cool for the day. "Where are the eggs? I can scramble some up for you."

Lottie looked around for the basket Kent had taken from her, but she didn't see it. "I thought Kent brought it in."

Sarah looked confused. "I haven't seen him."

"I'll go see where he put it," Lottie said and left the kitchen. She found the basket immediately on the table by the front door, along with several letters on the floor.

She picked up the letters and gave the basket to Sarah, who had followed her. Taking the letters, she went into Kent's office to put them on his desk.

Curiosity made her look through them and she frowned when she saw a letter addressed to her father. Confused, she stared at it for a moment.

She remembered reading the letter from Pa the night before, but she definitely hadn't answered it yet. In fact, the writing wasn't even hers.

She began to open it. Why would anyone else be sending a letter to her father?

It was a short message that went straight to the point. Someone had written this letter pretending to be her, accepting her father's offer of the family farm.

The letter said she had been too hasty in her decision to marry Kent and that it was best for everyone if she returned home. It even said that she would be on the next train once she received a response.

She sat down in Kent's chair, furious. She could guess that one of two people could have done this: Grant or Mary, or both of them.

Did they hate her so much that they were willing to do anything to get her out of their son's life? She never would have expected them to pull something like this.

Looking over the letter again, she could tell that a man had most likely written it by how stiffly the words had been formed. Most women wrote in a more flowy style.

If she refused to get on that train back to Maine, Lottie wondered, would Grant resort to something more sinister? Was her life in danger?

Lottie sat in Kent's chair for a long time. At first, she was so shocked that she couldn't think of what she should do next.

Sarah came in to inform her that breakfast was ready, but Lottie wasn't hungry. After making sure Sarah made a plate for Kent, Lottie stayed where she was.

Eventually, she would need to show this letter to her husband. She hated that she had to do so. Even though Grant had been so harsh with him, she knew Kent loved his parents.

She didn't want to be the one to push more of a wedge between them. But she needed to tell him and she only hoped they would be able to work through this new problem together.

Picking up the letter Grant wrote, she stood. She saw the letter her father had written to her on the corner of the desk and picked it up, too, glad that Grant hadn't destroyed it.

She needed both as proof of what was going on.

She slowly made her way up the stairs and to their bedroom, where Kent was propped up against some pillows, eating breakfast.

She studied him for a moment, noticing that his face had more color to it and he looked much better now that he wasn't walking on his leg.

"Hi," Kent greeted her with a grin. "I'm really sorry I couldn't help more."

"It's okay," she was quick to reassure him. "Like I said, I'd rather you allow your leg to heal. You'll be up again and helping before you know it."

Kent nodded and took a bite of toast. "What do you have there?"

Lottie took a deep breath and sat down in the chair by his bed. Now was the time to tell him what she had discovered.

She thought of how they had expressed their love for each other the night before. She prayed this wouldn't ruin their relationship.

"I have something to show you. I would like to ask that you don't say anything until I've finished talking," Lottie said.

Kent nodded as he set the tray on his lap aside. "What is it?" he asked when she didn't immediately speak.

"Last night, I received a letter from my pa back in Maine. This is what he said." She held out the paper.

He took it and began to read. She kept her eyes on his face, and immediately saw concern. "What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I had already decided to not accept his offer," Lottie said. "I was going to write a letter to tell him that, but you came out onto the porch. We went to bed after that and I must have left the letter on

the rocking chair.”

“Okay, so... I’m sorry. You asked me not to talk, and here I am full of questions.” Kent gave her a small grin. “Go on.”

“I’m assuming you were the one who knocked the letters to the floor by the front door.”

He nodded. “Sorry about that. I couldn’t pick them up.”

“I did that for you and took them into your office. Curiosity made me look through them and I found a letter that was addressed to my father. Since I hadn’t answered him yet, I opened it.”

She held out the second letter to him. Kent’s eyes became guarded as he took it. She could tell he suspected that he wasn’t going to like this one. She stayed silent as he read it.

“This handwriting is my father’s,” Kent said softly. “I can’t believe he would do something like this.”

He leaned back against the pillows. “No, actually, that’s not true. With the way he’s been acting, I *can* believe he’d do something like this.”

Kent looked more sad than angry. Lottie watched as he read through both letters again before setting them aside.

“I’m so sorry that you have to deal with this,” Kent said.

He picked up her hand and tugged her toward him. Lottie allowed him to pull her onto the bed, by his side.

“First of all, I want to thank you for the sacrifices you’re making

for me. My dream of running a ranch would have never become a reality without you.”

Lottie didn’t say anything, but she did relax against him. Kent believed in her.

“I have to admit, I’m very surprised at how my father is handling this entire ranch and mine business. He is a stubborn man and likes to do things his way, but he’s never been cruel to those around him. It is making me wonder if there is something else going on that I’m not aware of.”

“I’m not sure what to do about this letter. Do we confront your father? Or do we wait and see what happens?” Lottie asked.

“I’m not sure. But there is one thing I will promise you. We will continue with our plans with the ranch. I won’t let my father force me to run the mine.

“Someday, my parents will see what a phenomenal woman you are,” Kent said as he kissed her cheek.

Lottie appreciated his words, but she was doubtful that his parents would ever change their opinion of her. But she was glad to hear that he wasn’t going to give up their dreams.

Nothing was said between them for a while after that, both of them thinking their own thoughts. Lottie knew she should eat breakfast and then saddle Lady.

With the mess the cattle had made of their field the day before, they would need to be moved into a new pasture if she wanted them to have any decent grass to eat. The task would take her all day.

But she didn't want to move. She liked being where she was right then, snuggled against her husband as they worked together to determine the best way to handle this new problem.

She left Kent settled against the pillows with a book in his hands a few minutes later. While she would rather stay with him, there were a lot of chores that needed to be done around the ranch. The faster she got out to the fields, the sooner she could be back by his side.

Lottie hurried outside and saw Grant leave the barn with a saddled Jack. She immediately headed toward the chicken coop, not wishing to get in a position where she would need to talk with him.

She wouldn't be able to keep quiet about the letter he'd written to her father on her behalf.

There wasn't anything she needed to do with the chickens, but she pretended to be busily feeding them. She didn't leave the chicken coop until she knew he was well on his way to his destination.

Leaving the coop, she went to saddle Lady. There was one thing she had to admit. She was glad Grant's guests were gone.

It was tiring to feel obligated to be a hostess to people she hadn't even invited. She did wonder, though, if their visit had been successful for Grant, although she would never ask.

Once Lady was saddled, she rode toward the cattle. Maybe they would be calm and docile for her and willingly move into a new field before lunch.

She still wanted to see if she could prepare a small vegetable

garden.

Grant led the gelding Kent had loaned him away from the barn before mounting him. It had taken him almost thirty minutes to saddle the animal and by the time he was done, he was hot and sweaty, two feelings he absolutely hated.

He glared at the sun that was inching higher in the sky, knowing he would be even hotter before the day was done.

He urged the horse forward and wished he could remember his name. But the gelding didn't seem to care that Grant didn't use his name and willingly moved forward at his commands.

Spotting Lottie with the chickens, he wrinkled his nose in disgust. Of course, he knew where eggs came from, but he would rather purchase them from a store, already washed and ready to be used.

He wondered if he should stop and ask Lottie what the horse's name was, but she didn't even look up as he passed, so he moved on. As long as the horse obeyed his commands, that was all that mattered.

He directed the horse toward the mine, wondering what the problem was and why Riley had needed to come and get him. He

hoped that whatever it was, it could be resolved quickly.

He dug his heels lightly into the horse's side and he picked up his pace.

He could see the cabin he'd purchased along with this land and wondered if Kathy was there, although he was sure Riley would have looked for her there before riding all the way to Kent's house in search of her.

Grant felt a twinge of regret that he hadn't spent much time with his daughter since his arrival from Denver. The quick wedding Kent had had and then trying to convince him to give up his plans for the ranch was taking up most of his time.

He used to be close to his daughter when she was a child and had fond memories of Kathy wanting to spend all of her free time with him in his stores, stocking the shelves, unpacking crates, and helping customers find what they needed.

As she grew older, she developed an interest in the finances of the stores. Grant hadn't minded that Kathy wanted to learn how to run the businesses, but he had also assumed she would lose interest when she was old enough to marry and start her own family.

Instead, she had spurned any young man who had shown even a remote interest in her and kept asking Grant to teach her all he knew.

When Mary had suggested that Kathy travel here to Green Valley, he had thought it was a good idea. Maybe part of the reason Kathy wasn't interested in any of the men in Denver was because she had grown up with them.

He was sure that here, in this new environment, she'd meet someone and then quickly marry.

Instead, she was doing the job Kent should have been doing, and seemed to actually like it. Besides, the mine was too far away from Green Valley for her to easily make visits or meet new people.

He tried not to stew and worry about both his children, but he couldn't help it. Wasn't that what fathers did, after all?

Neither of them was doing what he had directed or expected them to do, and what he thought was best for them. Not only was his son throwing away his chance at an easy life on some pipe dream, but he had nearly gotten himself killed while doing it.

Kathy was willingly doing men's work, and was constantly around rough miners who had no idea how to treat a woman right. The entire situation deeply hurt him.

He didn't want his son or daughter to grow up the way he had, not knowing where their next meal was coming from, never knowing where they were going to live, if they were even safe.

He arrived at the cabin and slid off the gelding, securing the reins near a small fenced field. He knocked on the door and then let himself inside, but he could tell at one glance that Kathy wasn't home.

As he turned around to leave, something caught his eye. There were curtains at the small windows and a matching cloth on the table. Colorful wildflowers bloomed in a metal cup.

Everything was clean and neat. Stuffed red pillows were propped up on an old brown sofa.

A few books sat on a small table near the sofa, one of them opened as if waiting for its owner to begin to read where she had left off. Wood was stacked neatly next to the stove and the fireplace.

The cabin was extremely small, only two rooms. But he could see that his daughter had done her best to make it a home and she smiled at the obvious touches she'd added.

He was aware that Kent had offered to let Kathy live with him and Lottie, but she had declined.

Although Grant couldn't understand why she would want to live on her own, he made a mental note to let his daughter know how impressed he was and that she had done a great job cleaning the cabin up from its original run-down state.

A loaf of bread sat on the counter, a lightweight cloth covering it. There was a knife nearby and he suddenly couldn't help himself. He picked up the knife and cut a thick slice off the loaf.

He found a small crock of butter and even a jar of honey. Smiling, he lathered the butter and honey on the bread and took a large bite. His eyes widened as the taste.

Kathy had obviously learned how to make bread, and this was some of the best he'd ever had. He had the entire slice eaten before he made it back to the horse, and part of him wanted to go back for another slice.

But he remembered Riley's words that there was a problem at the mine so instead he climbed on and continued on his way.

Again his thoughts wandered as he thought about the letter he'd found that morning. Remorse filled him. He shouldn't have

answered the letter like he had.

While he wanted Lottie to decide that this life wasn't for her, he shouldn't be trying to make things go his way behind her back. He was heading toward a major problem with the mine and leaving a problem that he had caused with Kent's new wife.

A memory flooded his mind of when he was living at the orphanage. He had received a demand to meet with the headmistress.

It was then he was told that since he had just turned fifteen, it was time for him to take on a different role, a more active role, at the orphanage.

He was expected to begin working the vegetable garden, as well as washing dishes after every meal. He wouldn't be able to eat until his responsibilities were completed.

"We are offering you the opportunity to stay here out of the goodness of our hearts," he could remember the headmistress saying, a wide smile on her face as if she had expected him to be grateful they weren't forcing him out. "As long as you work hard, you may stay as long as you wish."

He remembered feeling upset that his life was being mapped out for him, and the knowledge that he had no say in it. He had run away that night.

While he had been aware that it would be difficult to support himself, he hadn't cared. At least it was his decision.

Pushing his memories aside, he urged the horse into a gallop, and the gelding responded eagerly, almost as if he also wanted to run.

He smiled, realizing that he missed this, being on the back of a horse with the wind in his hair and the warm sun on his face.

He soon arrived at the mine and, a bit reluctantly, tied the horse to a post in front of a small rickety building that was the office for the mine. He saw Riley's horse nearby, as well as a horse he didn't recognize.

He stepped into the office and Riley looked up from behind a desk with relief. "You made it. I know I should have waited for you, but..."

Grant waved his words away. "It's fine, better that you returned here. So, what's going on? Have you found Kathy?"

The door opened again and Kathy entered. He sighed with relief that she looked just fine, but then he frowned as he realized that she was wearing men's pants with a blue shirt tucked into them.

She had boots on her feet and a black men's hat on her head. Her blonde hair was braided and hung down her back, almost to her waist.

What was she doing, wearing clothing like this? Didn't she realize that if she dressed like a man, the miners would treat her like one and not like the lady she had been raised to be?

"Hello, Father," Kathy greeted him with a kiss on his cheek.

It was all he could do to keep himself from lecturing about her attire. But the serious expressions on Kathy's and Riley's faces suggested that now wasn't the time for correcting Kathy and her choices.

“As you can see, Riley did find me. I had gone on a short ride this morning and neglected to inform him where I was.”

“I’m glad you’re here and safe. I got here as soon as I could. What is going on?” he asked again.

“Sit down,” Riley said, pointing to a nearby chair.

Kathy exchanged a look with Riley, who gave her a short nod. It was almost as if they were communicating without words, and then Kathy began to talk.

“We are having problems with a vicious gang that haunts this area. They’ve caused issues off and on over the last few years.”

“What kind of problems?” Grant asked with concern.

“Stealing, harassing people who ride off on their own, rustling cattle.”

Riley gave Kathy a pointed look before continuing. He was obviously not happy that she had gone riding on her own that morning.

“After a few weeks of this, they move on to another part of Nevada or territory, which makes catching up to them hard.”

Riley paused and Grant nodded, letting the foreman know that he was listening and Riley should continue.

“Every Wednesday we send a wagon into Green Valley, which in turn takes the silver we’ve mined to Carlson City by train. The gangs have figured out our schedule, and in the last few weeks have attacked the wagon before it can make it to Green Valley.

“There are usually about six to eight men who stop the wagon, take what they can in only a few minutes, and then quickly disappear. They don’t take everything in the wagon, but it’s enough that sometimes we can’t send what’s left to Carlson since it’s no longer a full load.”

Kathy spoke up. “For the last few weeks, the wagon has been forced to return to the mine since so much ore has been taken.”

“What have you done to stop this?” Grant asked, suddenly feeling in his element. This was what he did well, handling problems and coming up with a solution.

“We’ve thought about changing the day we go into Green Valley, alternating between one of the other days of the week. But this isn’t really an option in the long term.

“The train must have the ore loaded in a car by Wednesday evening to get to Carlson City by Friday. We have miners who aren’t afraid of the gang taking the ore in, men that are also good gunmen. That worked for a while, but...”

“We instructed our men to not shoot to kill,” Riley broke in. “We don’t want deaths on our hands. But the gangs have figured this out.”

Kathy nodded. “There’s also another problem. The gang causes problems on payday, which was yesterday. Once the men are paid, they each get a day off, alternating between them all.”

She paused and Grant saw sorrow on her face.

“After the shift was over yesterday evening, the few that would have today off headed into Green Valley, like they usually do. But

the gang attacked them and stole their money by gunpoint.”

“Luckily, no one was killed, but we feel that it’s only a matter of time,” Riley added.

“Why haven’t you told me about this?” Grant asked, keeping his eyes on Riley.

While Kathy was supposedly the boss, he had hired Riley to be in charge. He should have been informed of this the moment he arrived last week.

“Don’t get mad at Riley, Father,” Kathy said. “I wouldn’t let him. I wanted to...”

She paused, as if she wasn’t sure how honest she should be with him.

“Just before you arrived, we came up with a plan to try to stop the attacks, but when we saw that it wasn’t making a difference, we decided you needed to know,” Riley spoke for her. “Especially now that they’re attacking and robbing the men as they go into town with their pay.”

Grant just shook his head. He was terribly upset that he wasn’t told of these problems from the beginning.

He had even spent a full day here at the mine the day after he arrived, but Riley hadn’t even hinted at any problems.

“Father, don’t be upset with Riley. He wanted to tell you right from the beginning, but I wanted to try to fix things my way first. I wanted you to see that I could run things and take care of any problems that come up, no matter what they were.”

Staring at his daughter, it occurred to Grant that because of the way he had been handling the situation with Kent, he had inadvertently made Kathy feel like she couldn't come to him for help.

"Tell me again exactly what is going on," he said again.

This time, he listened carefully to what Kathy and Riley said. When they were finished, he had to admit, if only to himself, that the decisions they'd made were exactly what he would have done.

This was one thing he had taught Kathy years ago: when a problem comes up, always try the least evasive plan to put a stop to it. Then, if that didn't work, make new plans that were more detailed.

"Wednesday is only two days away." He thought for a minute. "How many men are working in the mines?"

"About twenty," Riley replied. "Most of them work full days, although there are a few who work shorter hours."

Over the next hour, the three of them came up with a plan that might deviate the gang from attacking the wagon. Riley showed his expertise by coming up with the idea to have their best shooters take the wagon in, and he would go with them.

Even Kathy helped with the plan and Grant was impressed with her suggestions, though he was glad she didn't insist on going into Green Valley with the wagon. He didn't want her anywhere near potential violence.

A loud bell rang in the distance and Riley stood up. "I need to get out there. That's the dinner bell and there will be a shift change."

After Riley left, Kathy stayed where she was, her lips thinned and hands clasped tightly in her lap. She was obviously upset, but Grant wondered if it was because she had needed to bring him into the problem after she couldn't solve this one on her own.

"I hope you don't go back to the ranch and get after Kent," Kathy said after a long moment of silence.

He didn't say anything, but he knew his face flushed as he recognized that this was exactly what he would do the moment he laid eyes on his son again.

"Let me ask you a question. If Kent was running things, don't you think we'd still have this problem?" Kathy asked.

"I am willing to let things go until this situation is resolved, but I still don't approve of you running the mine in the place of your brother," Grant said.

Kathy threw up her hands and glared at him. "Why not, Father? We're both doing what we love. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"And I feel awful for Lottie. She traveled all the way here to marry Kent. She loves it here and she's so good for him. They work well together.

"He might have made decisions that you wouldn't have, but can't you at least be happy for him?"

She looked at him with determination in her eyes. "If you keep this up, trying to control Kent's life, you're going to push him away. Is that what you want?"

He was quiet for a long time as he thought over the wise counsel

Kathy had just given him. He also recognized what she was silently saying: that he was also pushing her away.

Grant gave his daughter a small smile. "I have to confess that I don't understand that decision of Kent's, either.

"There are so many women he could have chosen from, in Denver and very likely here in this area. But there is a chance..." He paused.

"There is a chance of what, Father?"

"I found a letter from Lottie's father," Grant found himself confessing.

Kathy brightened. "He wrote her? I'm so glad. Her father pretty much abandoned her, you know. She lost her mother and sister in a factory accident last spring.

"Then her father informed her that he was going to sell the farm and that she needed to either find a job to support herself or marry. Things weren't good between them when she left Maine, and Lottie didn't think she'd ever hear from him again."

"I read the letter, and the sale to their farm fell through. He offered it to her," Grant said.

Kathy frowned. "I wonder why he did that. He knew she was going to marry Kent. She can't run a farm from Nevada."

"Maybe he thought her plans might not work out?" Grant shrugged. "Anyway, I did something I'm not proud of. I wrote him back, pretending to be Lottie. I accepted the farm for her."

Oh, Father,” Kathy groaned with a sad shake of her head. “You need to stop trying to run everyone’s life.”

“I’m not going to mail it, I promise. In fact, the moment I get back to the ranch, I’m going to destroy the letter,” Grant assured her.

Kathy sat down in the chair next to him and took his hand in hers. “Father, please listen to me. You need to stop interfering.

“Kent is twenty-five years old. He is a man and it is up to him to make what decisions he feels is best for him, not you.

“No matter how unhappy you are about his desire to own a cattle ranch, Kent needs to be allowed to choose his own path, just like you did.”

She shook her head and he could see disappointment in her eyes. “I can help you destroy that letter, if you wish. You don’t want Lottie or Kent to find it.”

“I left it with the other letters on that small table by the front door. It’s so hard for me to see Kent ruin his life,” Grant confessed. “What if the ranch doesn’t work out? What if he loses everything?

“He has no idea how to run a cattle ranch and he is relying on Lottie to show him what to do.” He shook his head.

“She should be running Kent’s house for him, not out on the ranch, getting dusty and dirty. Kent should be running this mine like I meant for him to do, not talking his sister into doing the work for him.”

“Father, I wanted to do this. I enjoyed learning how to run a business at your side, remember? I have always wanted to run a

business of my own.”

“You have?” He was surprised at this. She had never indicated this to him before.

“Yes. I just never told you because I knew what your reaction would be.” She laughed softly.

“I had hoped that I’d marry someone who would want me to work at his side, that we’d run some type of business together. But that opportunity never presented itself.”

“That’s just it, Kathy. Don’t you want to marry and have a family of your own?” Grant asked.

“Of course I do,” she admitted. “But I don’t want to settle for someone who won’t let me be who I am. I’d rather be single the rest of my life than be forced into a life that I wouldn’t be happy in.”

Grant nodded. Kathy had just said the words he had whispered to himself the night he ran away from the orphanage.

“One thing that you taught us while we were growing up was to think for ourselves, but now that we’re actually doing that, you’re fighting it,” Kathy pointed out gently. “We’re just doing what you encouraged us to do.”

Grant laughed dryly. “I can see that I might need to change some of my thinking. But let’s talk about the mine. Please, tell me exactly what you are doing with it.”

Kathy eagerly began to talk, and he discovered that his daughter was going into the mine and working alongside the men. She did

the office work, the hiring, the scheduling of the men's shifts, and any paperwork that needed to be done.

Riley took care of the men, making sure they worked an honest day's pay. He even discovered that Riley had fired a few men because they hadn't treated Kathy with the respect she deserved as a lady.

Kathy and Riley met daily and made decisions together about the day-to-day running of the mine, and Grant could tell that they respected each other and their ideas.

In fact, he was beginning to wonder if romantic feelings were developing between the foreman and his daughter. He pushed those thoughts away, only wanting to deal with one in-law at the moment.

When Kathy finished her explanation of everything she had been doing with the mine, Grant was impressed. Most of the decisions she'd made, he would have done the same.

And he had to wonder, if Kent had been running the mine, would he have done just as well? He wasn't sure if he could have, especially because his heart wouldn't have been in it.

After his talk with Kathy, Grant spent the rest of the morning with Riley, allowing him to show how the mine was being run underground. Grant was pleased to see that the men respected Riley and even greeted Grant with enthusiasm when they found out who he was.

Later that afternoon, he left the mine, feeling encouraged.

He'd had a good talk with Kathy and gotten to know Riley better.

While he still didn't like that his daughter was working with the mine, he felt like he understood why she wanted to.

Just before he left, he again visited Kathy in the office.

"Your mother would love to see you for dinner this evening," he told her. "We haven't been able to spend much time with you since we arrived."

"That's because of Kent's wedding and then you invited those guests," Kathy pointed out. "If you're willing to wait for about an hour, I can ride back with you."

Grant agreed to wait and he was glad he did so since it gave him a chance to witness Kathy at work.

As Grant rode with his daughter toward the ranch house, he felt good about their talk. He hated the conflict and tension that was between them all, but he recognized that he had a part in it.

He still didn't like the fact that Kent had made the decision to start up a cattle ranch without his knowledge, but hoped he might be able to have a conversation with his son about it, like he'd been able to with Kathy, sometime in the near future.

After lunch, Kent slowly moved to the porch and propped his leg on a log. He carefully unwrapped the bandage, hoping fresh mountain air would help with the healing.

It looked angry and red, but from what he could tell, it wasn't infected.

He prayed it would heal quickly. He hated that Lottie was doing all the work, but if he tried to help, he would only be a hindrance.

"Your job is to get better," Lottie had said to him firmly when she came in for the noon meal. She then left quickly, as if afraid he'd follow her.

Kent also wondered when his father was going to return. He faced the direction of the mine, determined to have a frank talk with Grant the moment he came back.

Reading a letter that wasn't intended for him, as well as replying to it, was going over the top.

As the sun continued to move across the sky, getting closer to the west, Kent wondered what was keeping his father. He was glad to

finally see two horses coming toward them, and that Kathy was with Grant.

They seemed to be conversing easily with each other and he hoped this was a good sign, that Grant had finally allowed Kathy to explain what she'd been doing with the mine. At one point, Kathy threw her head back in laughter over something Father had said.

Kent had always been envious of their close relationship. He wondered why Grant was always serious with him while he laughed and joked with Kathy.

Instead of coming to the house, they went to the barn to take care of the horses and Kent had to force himself to stay where he was. When they emerged from the barn together a few minutes later, they headed in his direction.

"How's your leg?" Kathy asked as they approached, concern in her eyes.

"It's fine. I just have to stay off it for a few more days," Kent answered, doing his best to sound confident.

She walked to his side and studied the wound with interest. "I think it's going to take more than a few days for that to heal. It looks... like it hurts."

Kent laughed. "It does, but it feels better when I prop it up like this."

"Is Mother inside?"

"Yes, she is." He nodded and waited until Kathy disappeared inside, keeping a wary eye on his father.

He fully expected Grant to follow his sister into the house, but instead he sat on the porch steps. Maybe now was the time to bring up the letter.

Just as he was about to speak, Grant leaned his elbows on his knees and Kent noticed that he looked upset. "Have you heard about the gang that is terrorizing this area?" he asked.

Kent shook his head, instantly alert. He listened as his father filled him in with what was going on. The more Grant talked, the more concerned Kent grew.

"Riley told me this gang has also been connected to cattle rustling with some of the other ranches," Grant said.

"It sounds like we need to get the sheriff involved. I'm assuming he's aware of what is going on?" Kent asked.

"I would assume so, but I didn't ask Riley about that," Grant admitted. "I just wanted to warn you, so you can be on the lookout for any problems. Where's Lottie?"

"She had to move the cattle from one field to another. I'm expecting her back soon," Kent said.

The front door opened and Kathy stepped outside. "Father, I can't find that letter."

"What letter?" Kent asked with suspicion.

Grant sighed but didn't respond. Kent pulled an envelope out of this pocket. "Is this the letter you're looking for?"

He waved it in the air and fully expected his father to grow angry

and defend himself. Instead, Grant looked ashamed.

“Why would you write to Lottie’s father?” Kent asked, doing his best to keep his anger from growing, but it was difficult.

“I’m glad Lottie found it before it was taken into town to be mailed. Do you realize the problems you could have caused if this had been sent?”

“I know it was wrong, son. I realized that on my way to the mine. I was going to destroy it,” Grant said.

Kent just stared at him and then shook his head, not sure if he believed him.

“Father is telling the truth,” Kathy said. “He told me what he did and he was going to burn it when he got back here, although I think he was hoping he could get rid of it before anyone found it.”

“Why did you write the letter to begin with?” Kent said, trying and failing to keep the anguish out of his voice. “Do you hate Lottie that much?”

“Of course not,” Grant scoffed. “I’m just trying to do what’s best for this family.”

“I’m happy with Lottie, Father. You and Mother are going to need to accept her,” Kent replied. “I’m hurt that you would do such a thing.”

“I am sorry, for what it’s worth,” Grant said.

Kent didn’t respond. He could tell his father did feel bad for what he’d done, but he was still upset that Grant had done something so

awful in the first place.

“I did make a decision while riding back here from the mine,” Grant announced. He looked at Kathy as if letting her know that what he had to say would affect both of them.

“Your mother and I will stay for another few days, just to make sure that the next load of ore is safely on the train. But then we will head back to Denver.”

With those words, Grant slowly got to his feet and went inside. Kent wasn't sure what to think about his father's announcement. Kathy also seemed surprised.

Lottie arrived a few minutes later and the opportunity to talk to his sister passed, but Kent was determined to speak with her later.

He wanted to hear about what had happened between her and their father, and he also wanted to get her take on the threat of the gang in the area.

Once he had all the facts and got Lottie's opinion, he hoped he would know the next step to take.

Two weeks later

Over the next two weeks, things went smoothly with the ranch. Kent only allowed himself to stay off his leg for about five days before he insisted on working again.

Lottie had done her best to stop him, but hadn't succeeded. She relaxed when she saw that he could work almost as hard as he had been able to before the accident and didn't seem to be in pain.

She welcomed Kent by her side—she had missed working with him. She had done what had needed to be done, but hadn't enjoyed it as much as she'd thought she would, working alone.

She had managed to start a small garden and was looking forward to fresh vegetables. Things between her and Kent's parents had also improved after the fiasco with the letter.

Grant had burned the letter he'd written, as promised, and had even apologized to her, although she had to admit that she wondered if he had been sorry because she had found out about it or if he really had been remorseful.

She was aware that Kathy had spoken to Grant about it, but she didn't know what had been said. But the good thing was that she no longer felt like Grant or Mary were trying to do whatever they could to get rid of her.

They seemed to have accepted her in Kent's life. During some of the meals they shared together, Grant even asked her a few questions about her childhood and what life had been like in Maine and so close to the Atlantic Ocean.

At first, Lottie had replied with short answers, but as they continued to show interest, she began to relax in their presence. Maybe they were beginning to accept her.

She also began to see good things about both of Kent's parents. Mary was a proper woman, always sitting in a chair with her back straight, her head held high.

Even when she was working on her embroidery or crocheting, her back was straight as a board. Lottie had to wonder if she ever had back pain from sitting in that one position all the time.

Mary's hair and clothes were always impeccable, and she changed her dresses at least twice a day. It seemed as if she didn't like to eat dinner in the dress she'd worn all day.

But she loved her son and daughter fiercely and wasn't afraid to show them affection. She even gave Lottie a hug one evening.

She had also left Sarah alone, allowing Lottie to ensure the maid did the work she'd been hired to do instead of interfering.

Lottie would probably always feel intimidated by Grant. He always said what he thought and once he made a decision, there was little

that could change his mind. But he had good business sense.

One evening, when Lottie and Kent were discussing an upcoming cattle drive and how many animals they should keep over the winter, Grant had offered good advice about holding onto the cattle to double their herd.

Things were also going well with the mine. The next Wednesday, Grant had gone with the wagon into town, along with four men Riley had chosen single-handedly, as well as Riley himself.

These men knew how to handle a gun and were large and burly. Lottie wasn't sure if this was the reason why the wagon wasn't attacked by the gang or if they were busy harassing people in other areas, but the wagon made it safely to town.

Grant didn't leave Green Valley until the ore was safely on its way to Carlson City. Kent had also gone with them and had spent a few hours talking with the sheriff.

When he returned, he'd told Lottie that he wasn't very optimistic of receiving any help from the lawman.

"He seemed to feel that his jurisdiction is just over the town of Green Valley, and not the surrounding areas," Kent had relayed, disgust in his eyes. "He promised he'd send a deputy out this way every few days, but that isn't going to put a stop to the problem."

Lottie hadn't been happy to hear that they weren't going to get help from the sheriff. If the gang was going to be stopped, the men who upheld the law needed to be the ones to do so.

Otherwise, the gang was going to continue what they were doing. Luckily, no one had been killed yet, at least as far as Lottie knew,

but it was only a matter of time.

Because of this conversation, Grant decided he had better stick around at least for a few more weeks instead of following through with his plans to head back to Denver.

While Lottie had been disappointed that they weren't going to get the house to themselves, Kent wasn't too upset about the change in plans.

"I hate to admit it, but we need another man around the ranch, at least until the threat of the gang dispenses," Kent explained. "I thought about asking Kathy to pull some of the miners over here to help guard things, but that isn't what they were hired to do."

Dr. Martin came out one evening, removed Kent's stitches from his leg, and announced that the scar looked as good as could be expected. He left soon after, explaining that he needed to travel to a nearby ranch to check another one of his patients who had broken an arm.

After he left, the rest of the evening became a turning point for Lottie.

Dinner had already been served and Sarah was busy cleaning up. Lottie joined Kent and his parents on the porch to watch the sun set.

She loved this time of day, watching the spreading pinks, reds, oranges, and even purples across the evening sky. Every sunset looked different and sometimes she wished she knew how to paint so she could put what she saw permanently on canvas.

"Lottie, tell us about your family," Mary said, breaking into her

thoughts. "We know you're from Maine, but not much else."

Lottie wasn't sure she wanted to talk about her family. The hurt that she had lost so much still was close to her heart.

She sometimes found herself in tears when she thought about Ellen and her mother. When this happened, she forced herself to work harder, doing her best to get her mind off her losses.

And even though her father had sent a letter of apology while offering the farm to her, she still was hurt that he had pushed her away.

"I only have my father who is still alive," she answered. She relaxed a bit when she saw sympathy in Mary's eyes.

She found herself sharing more, hoping she wouldn't regret it. "My mother and sister died a few months ago."

"Oh, dear. I'm so sorry to hear that," Mary answered. "May I ask what happened?"

"They died in a factory accident. The three of us worked at a textile factory near the town where we lived.

"There was a..." Lottie paused and took a deep breath as again tears threatened to fall. "Fire and an explosion. They were killed."

"How absolutely awful," Mary said.

"May I ask why you didn't work on the farm?" Grant asked. "Why were you working in the factory in the first place?"

Kent reached over and took her hand in his. She held on like it was

a lifeline. She didn't want to answer these questions.

Why couldn't they talk about the mine or the ranch like they usually did this time of evening? But maybe she could help them understand why she had answered Kent's ad.

"My father's farm isn't near as large as this ranch is, but it's been in our family for generations. It wasn't doing well and we needed some extra money to make it through the winter months.

"It was decided that the three of us would work at the factory for six months while Pa took care of the farm." She looked directly at Grant, wanting him to understand.

"I offered to help Pa, but he felt women shouldn't work as hard as I would have needed to on the farm." She gave a soft laugh.

"If he had known how hard working at the factory was, maybe he would have changed his mind. Anyway, I felt like I needed to do my part, so I got a job there."

She paused for a moment, looking off into the distance. Suddenly, she could almost see her mother and Ellen walking along the dirt path that led to the barn.

She could hear Ellen's laugh as her mother pointed to a hawk flying high in the sky, under the swirling colors of the sunset. Ellen turned around as if she was looking for someone.

"Lottie?" Kent asked, squeezing her hand.

She blinked and her mother and Ellen disappeared. Tears began to stream down her face.

She knew she really hadn't seen them, that her imagination was playing tricks on her, but she wished it could have been real, at least for a moment.

"I have to admit, I've been watching how hard you have worked these last few weeks," Grant said. "If your father didn't want you to work on the farm, then how did you learn all that you know?"

"Oh, he let me when I was younger," Lottie said with a chuckle. "But once I was old enough to marry, he discouraged me from working. I did anyway, when I knew he needed help, but he didn't like it.

"He never understood how much I love being outside. Working in the factory was like torture for me. There were no windows. It was dim and humid.

"The air was full of dust from the textiles we made. Ellen didn't seem to mind it as much, and Mother... she was doing it to help out financially."

Lottie looked around the ranch and noticed there really was a hawk flying above them. "This ranch, it's like heaven to me.

"Yes, it is a lot of work taking care of cattle, but to be able to have fresh air to breathe, the sun on my face, even the rain in my eyes..."

She chuckled as she thought of a few days ago when a large thunderstorm had blown into the valley. She had gotten drenched in a matter of seconds, but had loved the feeling of water falling from the sky, the dark clouds that seemed to surround her, and the fierce wind that blew the dust away.

Kent had forced her into the barn when lightning started to sparkle around them, but they had stood at the doorway and watched as the storm moved quickly across the valley. She had never seen such a storm before and felt energized by it.

Kent also laughed. “I have to point out the dust the cattle create when you move them.”

She shrugged. “Yes, well... it’s better than what I had been breathing. There were women who had been working in that factory for years. The dust from the textiles was settling in their lungs.

“Some of them were starting to have trouble breathing, but they kept working because they had to. At least here, the dust does eventually settle.”

“I have to admit...” Grant stopped what he was saying when they heard a strange sound.

Lottie immediately jumped to her feet, straining to hear it again. For a moment, all seemed well. Then she heard it again—the frantic distress calling of cattle.

“Oh, no,” she breathed and began to run to the field where the horses were being kept for the evening. Kent followed.

“What’s going on?” she heard Grant yell, but she didn’t have time to explain that the cattle were in trouble. She would explain later.

The horses were both agitated, but she was able to catch Lady. Not bothering to saddle the mare, she threw herself on her back.

Clutching Lady’s mane with both hands, she urged her into a

gallop. She could hear Kent trying to catch Jack.

“Wait, Lottie,” he called, but she pretended not to hear.

Her heart was pounding, and she could tell by the loud mooing from the cattle that something was dreadfully wrong.

They were in the farthest field from the house, and she wondered what was going on that she could hear their distress from so far away. Maybe a predator had gotten inside the field and had killed one of the calves.

After all she'd been through for this ranch, she was determined to find out what was happening—and put a stop to it.

“**L**ottie, wait!” Kent called for the third time as loud as he could, but to no avail. He was sure she’d heard him, but she didn’t respond.

Frustrated with his wife, he leaped over the corral fence and ran toward Jack. It took him a few minutes, but eventually he was able to grab ahold of Jack’s halter.

He wanted to saddle the horse before riding him because he didn’t have experience of bareback riding that Lottie obviously had, but he needed to go after Lottie. He didn’t know what was going on, but he had a strong feeling that she was riding straight into danger.

It took him three tries before he was able to swing onto the back of Jack, who sidestepped a few times before settling down at Kent’s soft words.

“Let’s go, Jack,” Kent told him. “Go after Lady.”

Jack seemed to understand what was needed and began to gallop after Lottie. They passed his parents, both of them looking at him in horror as well as concern.

Grant raised a hand as if he wanted him to stop, but Kent ignored him. He needed to go after Lottie.

He knew exactly where the cattle were since he had helped move them earlier that day. Besides, he could also hear their frantic calls.

Jack galloped fast and he soon caught up to Lottie—she must have slowed down the closer she got to the field. Then she stopped and stared straight ahead. That was when Kent froze.

There were about eight men inside the field with the cattle, and he knew he was looking at the gang that had been causing so many problems with the mine and with other ranches. They were all on horses and all of them had cloth covering their faces so that only their eyes showed.

One man was trying to get the gate to the field open wider from the back of his horse, but he wasn't having much success. Other men were forcing the cattle through the small opening.

None of the men seemed aware that he and Lottie were nearby and witnessing the cattle rustling.

He glanced at Lottie, not sure what to do. Neither of them had brought a gun and besides, he had never been in a conflict of any kind, let alone one like this. They were definitely outnumbered.

A determined look crossed Lottie's face as she again urged Lady forward.

"Lottie, I don't think..." Kent began to yell, but she turned on him.

"We can't lose those cattle! If we do, we'll lose everything. We don't have money to replace them. So, no cattle, no ranch!"

Kent nodded. "You're right. Let's go, but we need to be careful."

Lottie stuck her hand into the pocket of her dress. "Of course."

His eyes widened as she pulled out a pistol. What was she doing with a gun? And did she even know how to shoot one?

And why didn't he think of that himself? He should be carrying one with him at all times.

Lottie kept Lady at an even trot, so Kent did the same. His heart was pounding so hard he wondered if she could hear it. He was in awe of her bravery.

What woman would ride toward eight men who were rustling their cattle right before their eyes? But while he admired her, he also was concerned.

It seemed she was willing to do whatever it took to get those cattle back, even if it meant that she could lose her life, and Kent wasn't about to let that happen.

Since the gang didn't know they were near, he hoped he could get them to leave by the element of surprise. But his hopes were dashed when Lottie fired the gun into the air.

"Stop!" Lottie yelled and shot the gun again. "Get out of here!"

The sound of gunfire made the cattle even more agitated and the animals that were out of the field began to run toward the open range. It didn't take long for the rest of the herd to follow.

One of the men turned and fired a gun in their direction and Kent's heart sank. These men weren't going to run just because they were

spotted. They were going to take the cattle no matter what.

“Lottie, don’t go any nearer to them!” he shouted.

But for the second time that day, Lottie ignored him and kept moving forward, one hand gripping Lady’s mane and the other pointing the gun at the gang.

Nothing was going to make her stop doing whatever she had in mind.

Lottie was livid. She felt so angry at what was happening, she couldn’t think straight. All she wanted to do was stop these men from taking all they had worked for.

She’d been worried a wild animal had been attacking the cattle, and instead the threat was predators of the two-legged kind.

She forced Lady into the middle of the herd and tried to move what cattle she could toward the center of the ranch. She was happy to see that Lady didn’t seem agitated because of everything that was going on and easily obeyed her commands even though Lottie wasn’t in a saddle.

Kent was trying his best to help, but his inexperience was causing more problems. The gang had eight men among them, while it was only her and Kent trying to stop them.

Over the next few minutes, the gang was able to get half the herd out of the field and soon were out of shooting range. If they were able to take any more, there wouldn’t be a profit for the ranch.

While she knew using the gun was futile because they were so far away, she fired it anyway at the nearest man.

He clutched his arm and turned around with a yell. Maybe she wasn't so far away, after all.

She pointed the gun at him again, but a gunshot went off behind her. She felt a searing pain through her own right arm, making her drop her gun.

"Oh, great," she groaned at the intense, burning pain.

Lady slowed down and stopped on her own. Lottie bent over, using her left hand to clutch her arm, but the pain grew even more fierce when she touched the wound.

Looking down, she saw blood spreading down her arm and the world around her grew black as she slid to the ground.

"Lottie!" she heard Kent yell as if he was far away.

She bit her lip, doing her best to not faint. She had never done so in the past and she wasn't about to do so now. She heard Jack galloping towards her and then Kent was at her side.

"Lottie, are you okay?" Kent asked as he gently touched her arm. "Lottie?" he said again when she didn't answer. "Don't you dare die on me!"

She gave a harsh laugh at his words. "I'm not going to die. I just got shot in my arm."

"Are you sure you didn't get hit anywhere else?" Kent asked as he used his hands to assess any other damage she might have on her

body.

“I’m sure. Don’t worry about me. You need to go after the cattle,” she said through her pain as she pushed his hands aside.

Kent shook his head. “It’s too late. They’re too far away.”

Oh, no,” Lottie said in anguish as she began to cry. “We’re going to lose everything.”

“Don’t worry about the cattle. Right now, I need to get you back to the house,” Kent said as he scooped her up.

“I can walk,” Lottie argued, but she stopped when the world seemed to tilt around her.

“You’re going to ride Jack back to the house,” Kent said as he helped her on the horse.

“Where is Lady?”

“She took off. Hopefully she’s waiting for us at the barn.”

Since it seemed everything around her was swirling, she clamped her lips shut in an attempt to not be sick. She found it ironic that history was repeating itself, except she was now the one who’d gotten hurt and was on the back of Kent’s horse while Lady ran off.

But she felt devastated. After all she had done to stop the rustling, she hadn’t succeeded.

They were going to lose everything.

Kent kept Jack walking at a slow pace as they made their way back to the house. Lottie looked very pale and there were a few times when he wondered if she was going to fall off the horse, but she nodded her head every time he asked her if she was alright.

She kept muttering about the cattle and how they were losing everything, and Kent didn't know what to tell her. Because she was right.

But at the moment, he was more concerned about Lottie than the cattle. Once he was sure she would be okay, then he would worry about the herd.

When he approached the house, his parents were still on the porch as if they were waiting for them. His father hurried to his side, concern on his face.

“What is going on?” he demanded. “I heard gunshots and...” He paused and frowned when he saw that Lottie was injured. “Did you get shot?”

“Can we get Lottie inside before we have this conversation?” Kent demanded.

His mother joined them. “Come off that horse, dear. Let me help you to your room.”

Kent swung Lottie off the horse and kept her in his arms, he hurried into the house. As he began to walk up the stairs, Lottie spoke up.

“I don’t need to go to bed. Just take me to the kitchen.”

He looked at her and saw that her natural pink color had come

back to her cheeks now that she was off the horse. He changed direction and carefully set her in a chair.

She immediately began to pull her dress sleeve up to look at the wound.

“We need to get Dr. Martin out here,” Kent said as Grant and Mary joined them.

“I can’t believe this happened,” Grant ranted as he paced back and forth on the wood floor. He raised a closed fist at Kent. “Can’t you see how dangerous it is to run a cattle ranch?”

“Because of your so-called dreams, your wife got shot. What if she had been killed? Is this really the kind of life you want?”

Kent closed his eyes against the harsh words his father was throwing at him. He didn’t need Grant to say what he was now thinking on his own.

It was his fault Lottie had gotten shot, and his father was right—she could have been killed. If the man who shot the gun had aimed just a few inches to the left, Lottie would have been gone.

“Grant,” Lottie said firmly, “now isn’t the time to have this conversation. Someone needs to go for the doctor.”

She looked at the wound, using her fingers to gently probe her skin. “I think the bullet is still in my arm and it needs to be dug out.”

“I’ll go get him,” Grant said. He glared at them both, then turned on his heel and left the house, the screen door slamming behind him.

Kent heard Jack galloping out of the yard five minutes later, letting him know that his father had taken the time to saddle the horse before riding him.

“I’ll heat some water,” Sarah said as she began to fill a large pan from the water pump near the sink. “And I have an old skirt that will do nicely for bandages.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Lottie said with a grateful smile. “Kent, sit down. You’re going to make a groove on the floor.”

Kent realized he had begun to pace, like his father had done before he left for the doctor. “I’m just worried about you.”

“I know, but I’ll be fine, I promise. I don’t much like having a foreign object in me and it does hurt like the dickens, but once the doctor fixes me up, I’m sure it will heal quickly,” Lottie said.

Kent sat down next to her and she reached out a hand to cover his. He couldn’t believe she was the one doing the comforting. He shook his head, thoroughly frustrated with himself.

He needed to make a lot of changes to be a successful rancher. But Lottie was right—they needed to get her fixed up before they talked about what should be done next.

He wasn’t surprised that Mary disappeared right after Grant left; Kent knew she didn’t like to be around blood. Sarah used some of the heated water to make some coffee and placed two mugs in front of them.

“Kent, did you see Lady when we arrived home?” Lottie asked.

He shook his head, but he also hadn’t been looking for the horse.

His concern was his wife.

“It might be a good idea to go out and see if you can find her,” Lottie gently said. “I’ll be fine, I promise. It’s not hurting near as much since I’m not on the back of Jack anymore.”

He wanted to argue with her, but she was worried about her horse. There wasn’t much he could do at this point, but he could go out and find Lady.

“I’m sure she’s close by,” he said as he stood up. “I’ll be back.” He started to walk out of the kitchen but then looked at the maid.

“Sarah, don’t let Lottie leave that chair,” he ordered. He waited until Sarah nodded and then he stormed out, much like Grant had just done moments earlier, the screen door slamming behind him.

It was getting too dark to see anything, though. Unless Lady was close by, he wasn’t going to be able to find her until morning.

He said a short prayer for the safety of his father as he rode into Green Valley for the doctor, and that Lottie would heal quickly.

He wasn’t sure if it would be a good idea to pray for the cattle they had just lost. Would God even care about that?

Figuring it wouldn’t hurt, he shrugged and asked God to help them figure out a way to get their cattle back. He wasn’t sure if God was even listening to him.

He couldn’t think of the last time he attended church. But surely He at least cared about Lottie.

He remembered a few times when Lottie had sat next to him in the

dark after his leg injury, whispering a small prayer that he would heal quickly. God seemed to have answered her prayers.

Maybe God will answer his, too. Less than an hour later, his father returned with the doctor.

“I seem to be making too many visits here,” Dr. Martin joked as he stepped inside the bedroom. “You two need to be more careful.”

Kent agreed with him. As he sat next to his wife, he thought over everything that had happened. He realized that Lottie had ridden right into danger, without any thought of herself.

While he admired her bravery, he was also upset that she hadn't listened to him. Didn't she know that her life was more important than a bunch of cows?

In trying to save the herd, she had gotten shot in the process. What if that bullet had killed her?

He clamped his mouth tight, not wanting to say what he was thinking, but he planned to talk to her as soon as he could. He didn't ever want her to put herself in such a dangerous position again.

Dr. Martin got straight to work and after cleaning the wound on Lottie's arm, easily popped the bullet out.

“You're lucky that it didn't go any deeper,” he commented as he placed a bunch of bandages over the wound to staunch the blood flow. “It will heal quickly, if you don't overdo it.”

Lottie was pale and her hand was sweaty as Kent held it. He could tell that she was in a great deal of pain, but she barely made a

sound as Dr. Martin worked on her.

Kent began to wish that she would cry out. He still remembered how much pain he had been in when Dr. Martin put his stitches in his leg.

He knew how much it hurt. Why did she feel like she couldn't show her pain?

Then his father entered the room, and he realized that Grant was at least part of the reason. Grant frowned and Lottie turned her face away toward the wall, as if she wanted to disappear.

Luckily, Dr. Martin only needed to put in a few stitches and Kent breathed a sigh of relief when Lottie stopped squeezing his hand so tightly.

"You'll be fine in a few days," Dr. Martin said as he placed a comforting hand on Lottie's shoulder.

He put his equipment in his black bag and then started to leave the room. He stopped at the doorway. "I'll come by in a week to check on things."

After the doctor left, Kent picked up a wet rag and placed it on her head, just like she had done with him. She left it there for a moment and then removed it.

"That really hurt," she murmured. "I'm glad the bullet is out of me, though."

"Can't you see that raising cattle is too dangerous?" Grant ranted as he paced back and forth in the bedroom. "Of course it hurts. Getting shot hurts! In fact, it can kill!"

“Father,” Kent said, a warning in his voice, “right now isn’t the right time for a lecture.”

“I think those men are the same gang who have been targeting the mine. It’s not just the ranch that is under attack.” Lottie took a deep breath as she tried to sit up.

Her face tightened when she leaned on her injured arm, and Kent quickly helped her. “There is another shipment of ore going out tomorrow. Right?”

Grant gave one nod, though he looked suspicious. Kent was grateful that at least his father didn’t continue to berate her.

“We need to do whatever we can to stop the gang from attacking that wagon, by any means necessary,” Lottie continued, her voice growing stronger.

“I agree,” Grant said.

“It’s time for us to come up with a plan—and I have an idea,” Lottie added.

Grant stared at Lottie for a long moment. Here she was, just had a bullet dug out of her arm, and the ranch likely to be unsalvageable.

But she was worried about the mine, the business that she didn't want anything to do with. For all he knew, it was Lottie who was encouraging Kent to go into ranching instead of running the mine. He had wondered if Lottie would just reassure Kent that she would support him if he decided to give up on the ranch. Maybe then he would do what was expected of him.

"What do you have in mind?" Kent asked eagerly.

Lottie didn't answer his question, but looked at Grant as if she was waiting for him to say something.

There was only one word he could think of to ask. "Why?"

She must have known exactly what he was asking because she gave him a soft smile. "Because you're family."

Her words shocked him to the core.

“Family supports each other’s dreams and way of life, no matter what happens,” Lottie continued. “Yes, we’ve lost most of our cattle, but we can’t let the same thing happen to the mine.”

Grant’s heart twisted in his chest. He couldn’t believe Lottie was worried about the mine, after all he had done and said to her in an effort to get her to leave.

He felt touched and, for the first time, he felt a small connection to Lottie.

“What do you have in mind?” Kent asked again.

Lottie turned her attention to Kent. “How many men work at the mine?”

Kent shrugged. “Probably about twenty or so.”

Grant wanted to snap at his son. How would he know how many men they employed when he had it on good authority that he hadn’t visited the mine in weeks?

“What if we place armed miners along the route to town? When the gang attempts to attack the wagon, there will be men around to put a stop to it.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Grant said with a nod. For the first time since he’d heard about the problems with the gang, he felt cautiously optimistic.

“I think we need to get Kathy here to talk about this,” Kent spoke up. “She should be part of this planning.”

Grant stood up, knowing that his son was right. At the moment,

Kathy was the one who could give them all the details they needed.

“I’ll go get her.” He glanced at Lottie. “You get some rest until I get back.”

He left the room, fully realizing that Kent and Lottie were starting after him in amazement. He was actually surprised himself, but he was beginning to see that fighting against what his children wanted to do with their lives wasn’t working.

The fact that Lottie was the one who came up with an idea to put a stop to this madness the gang was doing impressed him. It was a brilliant idea and he wished that he had thought of it himself.

Jack was right where he’d left him after his trip into Green Valley for Dr. Martin. He had meant to take care of the horse after the doctor left, and now he was glad he hadn’t had the chance.

He mounted Jack and urged him into a fast trot.

He would have expected Lottie to try to talk Kent into going after the gang and try to find their lost cattle. If she had, Grant would have done everything he could to not let that happen.

The last thing he wanted was for his son to run off on a wild goose chase. He did hope the cattle would eventually be found, but he didn’t want Kent to take care of the problem on his own.

Instead, Lottie had suggested that they get the miners involved.

When he arrived at the mine, Grant secured Jack to a post and let himself inside the office. He was pleased to see Kathy sitting behind her desk, a ledger open in front of her.

Riley was also there, standing at the window. Grant studied both of them for a moment.

He wondered if he had interrupted something. Kathy's face was flushed red and Riley seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

"Father," Kathy said, greeting him with a tense smile. "I didn't know you were coming this morning."

"I have some news." He took a seat and made himself comfortable. "I don't know if you're aware, but Kent and Lottie lost about half their herd last night."

"What happened?" Kathy asked with concern.

"A group of men rustled them—right in front of them, actually," Grant explained.

"Oh, no," Riley said with a frown. "They're getting pretty bold."

"Lottie was shot," Grant said and then quickly added when he saw Kathy's concern, "She's fine. The doctor just left. But Lottie came up with a plan that might help the ranch as well as the mine."

He quickly explained Lottie's suggestion. As he talked, he kept an eye on Kathy and was glad to see that she looked relieved that something could be done.

"This is a great idea," Kathy said, relaxing in her chair for the first time since Grant arrived.

He nodded. "I thought the same. In fact, I feel like I owe her an apology."

Kathy grinned, but she didn't say anything.

Grant suddenly realized that he owed Kathy one, too, but he would have to make amends later. Right now, they need to focus on the problem at hand.

"How many men can you spare tomorrow?" he asked.

Riley spoke up. "We just hired five more men a few days ago. I think we should have some of the men work the mine like usual.

"We don't want to tip off any of the gang members that something is up if they are watching us. In fact, I'm sure they have men keeping an eye on the mine and its operation—they are too aware of what's going on."

Kathy nodded. "Yes. Yesterday, some tools disappeared that a few men had set aside while taking their lunch break."

"Good idea," Grant said. He leaned back and listened while Kathy and Riley came up with the plan of where each of the men would be placed along the route to town.

He liked how they worked together and found that he enjoyed sitting back and letting someone else decide what to do. Maybe he didn't need to always be in charge of everything.

For the first time, he realized that Kent and Kathy were no longer children. And they hadn't been for a long time.

Kent stayed by Lottie's side for a few hours after his father left the house. He was determined to keep her in bed as long as he could.

He encouraged her to talk to him more about her idea, and she did come up with some new options. He was sure she hadn't gotten very much rest the night before, but when he suggested she take a nap, she wrinkled her nose at him.

"I think we need a code word," Lottie suddenly announced.

"What?" He felt confused.

"I think we should call this Operation Heaven."

He looked at her for a long moment, sure that she had just lost her mind from the pain in her arm.

"This place is heaven on earth for me. I've only been here for a little over a month, and don't get me wrong, I love Maine.

"It's where I grew up and where my father still lives. I have to admit, I do miss the scent of the ocean."

"Maybe we can go back to visit someday," Kent suggested. "I've always wanted to see the Atlantic Ocean."

She smiled at him. "I'd like that. But what I'm trying to say is this ranch, so near the Sierra Nevada Mountains, is absolutely beautiful.

"It's heaven on earth. So, we should call our plans for stopping the gang Operation Heaven."

Kent laughed, finally understanding what she was trying to say. "That is a great idea."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss. "Now, why don't you do what

my father suggested and get some rest, at least until he returns with Kathy?”

He could tell Lottie wanted to argue with him, but she leaned back against her pillow and Kent settled in his chair to keep an eye on her. It only took him a few minutes to see that his wife wasn't going to be getting any rest any time soon.

She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them and looked around the room. She turned onto her side, and then moved to her back.

“I'm getting up,” Lottie finally announced as she threw the covers back and swung her legs to the floor.

“Do you think that's a good idea?” Kent asked halfheartedly, knowing that he wasn't going to be able to keep her in bed.

“Kent, I'm fine,” Lottie told him. “It's just my arm that's injured, not my legs. There are things that need to be done.”

“You just got shot!” Kent couldn't help but shout. It was one thing for her to want to get up, but another to want to work. “And you want to go do chores?”

Lottie patted his hand as if in comfort. “I'm fine,” she repeated.

Kent realized this was the perfect time to have the talk he wanted to have with her.

“Do you know what it was like to see you get shot and then fall to the ground?” He did his best to keep his voice steady, but instead it cracked, letting her hear his distress.

She reached out for her dress, but stopped at his words. "I—"

He interrupted her. "I thought you were going to die. Do you know what that's like?"

"I'm sorry," Lottie whispered. Even as she said the words, he wondered if she really meant them.

He shook his head and walked over to where she was standing. "You had a gun."

"Yes, I thought it would be a good idea to keep one with me," she explained.

"I didn't even know you knew how to shoot a gun," he added, though he likely should have realized that she could. It was almost like there wasn't anything she couldn't do.

"My father taught me one summer."

"Why didn't you tell me that you had one?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think of it."

"Where did you get it?"

"It's my father's. He gave it to me just before I left."

He sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. "I have to admit that I'm struggling with how you went after those men."

"They were taking our cattle, our livelihood," Lottie said, beginning to get angry.

“Lottie, don’t you know that you are more important to me than the cattle? Than the ranch?”

Those words seemed to silence her. She stared at him for a long moment. “I’m sorry,” she said again. This time, it seemed like she meant it.

Kent gathered her into his arms, doing his best to not touch her wound. Lottie stiffened for a moment before she relaxed against him.

“Please promise me that you won’t put yourself in a position like that again,” he murmured in her hair.

He felt her nod her head and he let out a ragged sigh.

Lottie was fairly quiet after their talk and Kent felt hopeful that he had gotten through to her. He insisted that she sit on the porch while he finished the morning chores.

His father, Kathy, and Riley arrived just as he finished gathering the eggs. Grant immediately took care of Jack, including giving him an extra scoop of oats, which pleased Kent.

He couldn’t think of a time when his father had taken care of his own horses in Denver.

When the chores were completed, they gathered around the kitchen table to talk about their plans. His mother even joined them, although Kent could tell that she wasn’t at all happy that they were planning to take matters into their own hands.

“Why can’t you get the sheriff to do this?” she asked at one point. “It’s his job, after all.”

Kent began to shake his head, but Riley spoke up.

“That’s a good idea, Mrs. Golightly. But even if Sheriff Jenson is willing to help, he only has a few deputies. We’re going to need more men to take care of this problem.”

Mary didn’t speak after that, and Kent knew she was worried about what could happen. He wished he could reassure her that everything would be okay, but he knew he couldn’t.

After lunch, Kent went into town with his father, along with Riley. They kept their horses walking slowly the entire way, attempting to pinpoint where each of their men should wait.

They were able to find several good places where the men could hide without being seen from the dirt road that led into town. He was surprised that Lottie hadn’t insisted that she come with them.

Instead, she was the one who suggested she stay behind. Kathy had gone back to the mine’s office to take care of some paperwork.

Once they arrived in Green Valley, Riley suggested, “Let’s go talk with the sheriff.”

Kent still wasn’t sure that bringing him into their plans was a good idea, but since Grant agreed, he followed his father and Riley toward Sheriff Jenson’s office. After all, Kent had already talked to the man, and hadn’t received much help or sympathy.

A few minutes later, the four of them were in the sheriff’s office, sitting on rickety chairs that were so weak Kent wondered if the

one he sat on was going to collapse under him.

“How can I help you men this fine morning?” Sheriff Jenson asked, leaning back in his chair, a slight smirk on his face.

Kent studied the man for a moment. Sheriff Jenson seemed to be about ten years older than him, but his dark hair was already thinning and showing gray. He had a ring on his left hand, showing that he was married.

He kept his eyes on Grant, as if he expected him to be the leader of their small group, probably because his father was the oldest, and also because he definitely showed that he was well-to-do by the way he was dressed.

Grant explained what had happened with Kent’s cattle, including how Lottie had gotten shot while trying to save the herd. Sheriff Jenson didn’t seem concerned until he heard about her injury.

“Is she okay?” Sheriff Jenson asked Kent.

He nodded. “Dr. Martin came out and took care of her this morning.”

“This does change things,” Sheriff Jenson said. “Now that someone was shot. Up until now, no one had gotten hurt.”

Kent felt confused at the sheriff’s words. Why would he not be concerned until someone had gotten hurt?

“We have come up with a plan and we are hoping to get your support,” Grant said. He began to speak and then stopped and gestured toward Riley.

“Mr. Guthrie can tell you what our plan is.”

Riley looked pleased and began to map out their plan to Sheriff Jenson in great detail. He listened intently and nodded from time to time.

Kent kept a sharp eye on the older man, fully expecting him to scoff at their plans. Sure enough, while Sheriff Jenson allowed Riley to explain their plan, he spoke the moment he could.

“I’m not too sure it’s a good idea that you’re taking things into your own hands.” He looked at Kent. “I’m sorry that you lost so many cattle, but it’s the way of the west out here.

“Bad men—or a gang, in this instance—do what they can to steal things. You should have come to get me. Your wife wouldn’t have gotten shot if you had.”

Kent stood up, irate at the sheriff’s words. Didn’t he remember that he had refused to help only a week ago?

“I knew that this wasn’t a good idea. We aren’t going to get support from him, Father. Let’s go.”

“I wasn’t done, Kent. Don’t get so hot under your collar. If you would allow me to finish what I have to say?”

Kent studied the sheriff before slowly nodding. Sheriff Jenson didn’t speak again until Kent sat back down, carefully, on the wobbly chair.

“Now, having said that, I am willing to help. You can count on the deputies to watch for the gang. This is a sound plan and I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that I should have thought of it myself.”

He gave each man a hard stare. “But I don’t want heroics. You need to make sure your men understand that they are only to do what they are told, nothing more.

“I don’t want any more people injured or killed.”

They left the sheriff’s office a few minutes later, and Kent felt a bit more optimistic. He was glad that they had followed his mother’s suggestion.

Over the next few days, Lottie spent most of her time resting, but she also helped with the planning of Operation Heaven. Kent and Grant had gone into Green Valley to speak with the sheriff and get his support.

She was glad Sheriff Jenson was willing to help—they could use all the help they could get. If the law was around, maybe they would be able to catch these men and put them in jail where they belonged.

Part of her wished she had gone with them, but she still remembered Mary's reaction when she agreed to stay behind. Kent's mother had actually looked very relieved.

At first, Lottie had thought that it was because of her injury, but she found out differently after Kent, Grant, and Riley left for Green Valley.

"Do you have your gun with you?" she had asked Lottie quietly, as if not wanting anyone to hear her question even though they had been alone.

Lottie had nodded. It was then she realized that Mary was worried

about their safety on the ranch.

She had planned to check on the cattle that hadn't been taken after Kent left for town, but instead she stayed near the house, working in the vegetable garden. It needed to be weeded, anyway, and she was able to keep an eye on things around her as she worked.

Since then, Mary began to treat her differently, almost as if she admired Lottie.

She stopped making subtle comments about how Lottie wasn't acting like a lady and instead asked questions about what she did around the ranch, as well as how she had learned to do what she knew back in Maine at her father's side.

Thinking of her father made Lottie again regret how she'd left him behind. She still missed her mother and Ellen desperately, and was glad she'd been able to stay so busy helping Kent get the ranch going.

Lottie woke up early Wednesday morning after not being able to get hardly any sleep the night before. She had laid in the bed beside Kent while her mind thought through every scenario that could possibly happen the next day.

What if someone else got shot or even killed? She still thought that Operation Heaven was the best idea to put a stop to the stealing the gang was doing, but she hated the thought that the day might not end the way she wished.

She didn't think Kent had gotten much sleep either, since he had tossed and turned more than usual. Before they had gone to bed, Kent had tried to get Lottie to agree to stay behind with Mary and Sarah, where she would be safe.

When Lottie insisted that she come, Kent hadn't been at all happy with her. But did he really think that she would be willing to not be part of things?

When she found out that Kathy was also going to be going, she refused to be left behind.

She was aware that Kent was worried about her, but she felt like she needed to help. Even though she didn't admit this to Kent, she felt strongly that she needed to stay at Kent's side through the entire event.

They needed to help each other and work together through this threat, just like they had on the ranch since she had arrived.

When the room began to get light, Lottie took it as a sign that she could now get dressed. She pulled on her split skirt and an old shirt.

Kent lit a lamp and picked up his pants and they dressed in silence. She was ready to leave the room when Kent stopped her.

"Lottie, I think that—"

She held a hand up. "Kent, nothing you can say will change my mind. I want to be part of this."

"I'm not going to try to talk to you out of coming," Kent said. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"Are you okay with me coming?"

"Yes." He nodded.

“Then I promise that I’ll be careful, as long as you will too,” Lottie replied.

Kent gave a slight grin. “I promise. And I would like another promise from you. If I tell you to stop going in a certain direction, or wait for me, or anything like that, will you listen?”

Lottie smiled. “I will.”

Kent pulled her close to him and they held each other for a long moment before he moved away.

They left the bedroom together and Lottie wished they had talked like this the night before. Maybe they could have gotten some sleep.

Sarah had coffee ready for them, and Lottie took a few sips before setting the cup aside. Kent put his hat on and they went out to do the morning chores.

Lottie was able to do work almost like normal, the stitches in her arm only pulled when she tried to lift her hand above her head to reach for a bridle. Kent immediately noticed and got it down for her.

The rest of the morning passed quickly. Because they didn’t have as many cattle, they had moved the entire herd to the closest field to the house to keep an eye on them.

They spent over an hour with Grant, Kathy, and Riley, going over their plans in an effort to make sure everything would go smoothly. They had decided to not force the miners to help because of how dangerous it could be, so instead Kathy and Riley had a meeting with them.

After explaining what was going on and what they planned to do, they asked for volunteers. Most of the men were more than willing to help, but there were a few who wanted to stay behind which they were also appreciative of. The work in the mine could still continue.

At the appointed time, there were fifteen miners that were strategically placed behind trees, bushes, and behind hills along the road to town.

Sheriff Jenson joined them, but had two of his deputies stay at the edge of Green Valley in case the gang made it to the train station. His other two deputies were scattered among the miners.

True to her promise, Lottie stayed at Kent's side. They hid in a gully where a stream ran through, and she allowed the gurgling water to calm her.

After they got into position, they waited for almost two hours but nothing happened.

A few wagons from neighboring farms and ranches passed on their way to town. Two men on horseback also passed uneventfully. Then, the wagon they were waiting for passed by, full of ore.

Nothing happened. Lottie began to wonder if the gang had decided to not attack the wagon that day. Maybe they had even left the area since they had taken the cattle.

Even though Lottie knew she should be happy that the wagon had passed unscathed, which meant that it would make it to the train station, she desperately wanted these threats to end.

She watched the wagon as it crested a hill. As it started down the

other side, suddenly the gang ran towards it on the back of horses, making a lot of racket.

They fired guns in the air and yelled in an attempt to create chaos. The gang quickly surrounded the wagon. This was the sign they were waiting for.

The miners that were nearby came out of their hiding places, their guns drawn. Kent did the same while Lottie followed, although she kept her gun in her pocket.

Because of the wound on her arm, she didn't want to fire unless she had to. It was the same gun she had used the night the cattle were rustled, and she still remembered its hard kickback.

The gang realized they were surrounded and instead of firing their guns in the air, they began to shoot at the men. Lottie saw one of the gang members try to climb into the wagon.

The driver of the wagon tried to push him back. The man was able to stay where he was and they began to exchange blows with their fists.

"Get down," Kent said as he pulled Lottie down beside him. Remembering her promise, Lottie obediently stayed by Kent's side, although part of her wanted to go help the driver.

Grant appeared from where he had been hidden. "Hold it right there," he yelled as he raised an arm, holding a gun with his other hand.

"Hey, that's the rich man who owns the mine," one of the gang members yelled out.

Another gang member had a rifle and used it to knock the gun from Grant's hand. Two other men grabbed Grant, who began to struggle to get away.

A few of the miners began to run toward Grant in an effort to help.

"Get him on my horse!" a man yelled. "We can get money from him."

The two men quickly tied Grant's hands up and tossed him over the horse like he was a sack of potatoes. One of the men climbed on the horse and then kicked its flanks.

The horse gave a loud neigh of distress but then took off down the road and away from town.

"Oh, no," Kent groaned. "They took Father."

Leaving Lottie on the ground, he ran toward their horses where they had been tied in a grove of trees for safety.

Lottie jumped up and ran after him. "What are you going to do?"

Kent gave her an incredulous glare. "I'm going after him."

"Wait, Kent," she called.

He jumped on Jack. "I have to get Father! Don't try to stop me!"

"I'm not," Lottie said. "But you shouldn't go by yourself."

"You aren't coming with me," Kent said firmly.

A few seconds later, he was gone. Lottie was tempted to follow him

with Lady, but she also knew by the time she was able to get on her horse, Kent would be too far ahead of her.

While she wanted to help, she knew if she tried, she could make things worse. She needed to trust Kent to catch up to his father, and that they were both going to be okay. All she could do was pray.

She turned her attention to the wagon and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Sheriff Jenson, his deputies, and some of the miners surrounding the other gang members. From what she could tell, only one of them had gotten away, the man who had taken Grant.

She saw Kathy standing next to Riley and she made her way toward them.

“Where’s Father?” Kathy demanded as she looked around for him. Lottie realized that Kathy didn’t know what had happened.

“One of the gang members took him,” Lottie said.

“What?”

“Kent went after them,” she explained, trying to sound confident. “Don’t worry. I’m sure Kent will be able to bring him back.”

Tears began to run down Kathy’s face and Riley put an arm around her in comfort, and Lottie found it quite interesting that Kathy didn’t resist him. “Maybe I should go after them,” he suggested.

Lottie wasn’t sure what to tell Riley, but Kathy nodded and looked relieved.

“I’ll take some of our men with me,” Riley added.

It only took a few minutes for him to gather three men who were willing to go with them, and they were soon riding in the direction Lottie pointed in an effort to catch up to Kent.

She was relieved that her husband wasn't going to be alone and she hoped Riley would be able to catch up to him quickly.

Kent urged Jack into a gallop and cursed himself as he saw the horse his father was on disappear into the distance. The horse the gang member was on was quite fast and Kent wasn't sure he was going to be able to catch up to them.

The horse left the main road and kept running through fields and meadows toward the mountains. He even jumped the stream easily at one point.

"Come on, Jack," he murmured and the horse seemed to run even faster. As he rode, he marveled at how well Jack responded to his commands as they darted around rock and bushes.

Lottie had done a great job teaching him how to get Jack to move quickly going in one direction and then another.

The gang member rode into a grove of trees that Kent knew eventually went into a thick forest.

He smiled to himself grimly, knowing that he might have a chance of catching up to them, if the man wasn't familiar with the area. He kept his gun ready in case he needed it.

A few minutes later, he was able to catch up to them. The horse the man was on was a good, fast rider, but Kent could tell that the animal wasn't comfortable riding over rocky ground and dodging around trees. He slowed way down.

"Get going," the man yelled as he dug his heels into the horse's flank. Instead of moving forward, the horse raised on his hind legs, effectively throwing Kent's father to the ground.

The man cursed as he tried to get his horse under control and the horse danced, his hooves narrowly missed stepping on his father. As Kent got closer, the man noticed that Kent had arrived and he immediately pulled out his gun, waving it in the air as his horse pranced around.

Kent did the same with his own, only he pointed it at the gang member as he slowed Jack to a walk. For a long moment, there was a standoff.

Kent wanted to urge Jack toward his father, who hadn't moved at all on the ground, but he didn't dare take his eyes off the gang member. If this man decided to fire his gun, he wouldn't be able to do the same in time.

Then, suddenly, the man jerked his horse forward and they took off into the trees, heading up the mountain. Kent slid to the ground and ran to his father, keeping a sharp eye out for the other man in case he decided to return.

"Father?" he asked, immensely concerned that Grant wasn't moving. "Father?" he said again as he began to untie the ropes that bound him.

Grant groaned and Kent wanted to laugh with joy at the sound.

“Let me get these ropes off.”

“What happened?” Grant asked weakly.

“The outlaw’s horse tossed you off,” Kent explained.

“I guess he didn’t like the extra weight,” Grant tried to joke.

With those words, Kent knew his father was going to be okay. He helped Grant to his feet, and his father limped slowly toward Jack.

It was a struggle to get Grant on Jack and then, with his encouragement, Kent joined his father. It was time to go home—and Kent wanted to get out of this area as quickly as possible.

Who knew if there were other gang members heading this way?

He wondered what had happened after he left the scene, but he hoped that no one else was hurt—or worse, killed. He hoped Lottie had listened and stayed behind.

He pointed Jack toward his ranch. It was time to go home.

Lottie stayed at the scene of the battle until Sheriff Jenson and his deputies left with the gang members they'd arrested, their hands tied behind them.

She waited while Kathy and Riley made sure all the miners were okay, and when they decided to follow the wagon into town to make sure it was going to be loaded on the train car in time, Lottie decided to head home.

She kept a sharp eye out for Kent, but didn't see him anywhere. She wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing, and hoped once she arrived home, they'd be there waiting.

Instead, only Mary and Sarah were there. Sarah was busy working on preparations for dinner, while Mary was in the parlor with some embroidery in her lap.

Lottie didn't understand how Mary could be so calm when there was so much going on with her husband, son, and daughter. She stepped into the parlor and tried to give Mary a confident smile.

"It's over," was all she could think of to say. She didn't want to be the one to inform Mary that her husband had been kidnapped and

her son was also missing, having left to rescue his father.

Mary looked up as Lottie sat down in her favorite chair. She set her sewing aside and Lottie immediately noticed her red eyes. Mary wasn't as calm as she tried to appear.

"What happened?" she asked.

"At first, everything went well. The miners who volunteered to help did their part. The gang was stopped from taking the ore and the sheriff was able to arrest... almost everyone."

"Was anyone injured?" Mary asked as she looked at the doorway. Mary had figured out that something was wrong because Grant and Kent hadn't returned with Lottie.

Lottie needed to inform Mary exactly what happened, but she began to wish that she hadn't come home until she knew Kent and Grant were back safe and sound.

She took a deep breath, but just as she was ready to tell Mary what happened, she heard a horse galloping into the yard. She jumped up and ran out the door and onto the porch.

"Kent!" she called out and ran down the steps. He turned as he helped his father off the horse. "You found him."

"I did," Kent said and gave her a welcoming hug. "I was able to run the man off."

Lottie began to cry, so grateful that her husband had returned safe and sound. She noticed that Grant was standing, but he favored one leg. "Are you okay?"

Grant nodded. "I injured my ankle, but I'll be okay."

"I'm so glad that you're back safe," Lottie said.

Grant took an uneven step toward her and gave her a one-armed hug. Lottie stared at him in surprise. She hadn't expected him to say anything to her, let alone give her a hug.

He must have seen the questions in her eyes. "I want to apologize to you, Lottie. I am very sorry for writing that letter, and reading the one your father sent you. I shouldn't have interfered.

"I'm also sorry about the way I've treated you since I arrived and for blaming you for losing the investment deal." He glanced at Kent, as if letting him know that his next words were also for him.

"I never understood my son's dream of owning his own ranch. It wasn't something I'd ever want to do, and I expected him to follow in my footsteps. I thought men who made their living from a ranch, farm, or off the land, were lesser than me."

Grant looked at Lottie and she knew he meant her way of life was included in his thoughts. "Grant..."

"Let me finish, please. If you hadn't taught my son what you have, about riding Jack, moving cattle, and making quick decisions at the spur of the moment... well, let's just say that I would be in real trouble right now.

"Kent has become the best version of himself because of you, Lottie." He looked at the house Kent had built and made a small circle as he gazed at the fields, garden, and the newly built barn.

"This is where Kent belongs, on this ranch. Not at the mine."

He took her hand and then grasped Kent's. He gave each a gentle squeeze and then pulled their hands together, until Kent was holding hers. "Kent belongs with you."

By the time Grant was finished speaking, tears ran down Lottie's face. She felt so touched at what Grant had just said to her and to Kent.

She smiled at her husband, who was looking at his father with amazement. Keeping Kent's hand in hers, she gave Grant another hug.

"Thank you," she said as she sniffed. She dug a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped the tears away. "I didn't think I'd ever hear you say these words. I'm so glad that you finally understand us, and what we're trying to do with the ranch."

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned around. Mary was standing there.

"I echo my husband's words," she said as she joined their small group. "Obviously, something happened that I'm not yet aware of, but I'm glad all three of you are back and are safe."

"And Kathy is safe, too," Lottie spoke up. "She wanted to get back to the mine with the men who helped us. We probably should send a message to her that Grant is back safe and sound."

"I'll head over there," Kent offered.

Grant nodded his approval and then tucked Mary's arm through his. "I need to spend some time with this lovely lady. I have a story to tell her."

Lottie watched as Grant walked away with Mary and she hoped and prayed that Mary would be able to hear what happened from Grant without falling apart. She was sure it would be difficult to learn that Grant had been taken by one of the gang members, but at least Kent had found him quickly.

The moment she was alone with Kent, Lottie threw herself into his arms. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Kent laughed.

"I'm not surprised that you want to know every detail. Let's just say that the man had a better horse that could run fast in a straight line, but I had the best gelding for dodging around obstacles. When the man made the mistake of heading into the forest, it didn't take me long to catch up to him."

"Good ol' Jack," Lottie praised the horse, who was contentedly grazing nearby.

"The man's horse ended up throwing Father to the ground. Then the two of them took off into the forest and up the mountain," Kent said.

Lottie studied Kent for a long moment and then grinned. "I'm sure there's more to the story than that, but I'll accept what you've told me, for now. I'm just glad that you and Grant are okay."

"What happened after I left?" Kent asked.

Lottie quickly updated him with the arrests. Then she remembered something.

"When Riley found out your father was kidnapped, and that you

went after them, he took a few of the miners and followed you.”

“He did?” Kent asked. “I didn’t see them. They probably stayed on the road and didn’t know that we veered off toward the mountains. Hopefully they’ll know that we’ve returned soon enough.”

Lottie’s eyes twinkled. “Kathy was very upset that Grant was kidnapped, and rightly so. Riley did a great job in comforting her.”

“What do you mean?” Kent asked.

“I think that they...” She paused, trying to think of the correct wording. “I think they have feelings for each other.”

Kent looked at her contemplatively. “That’s interesting.” He pulled Lottie into his arms. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. There might be another wedding in this family in the near future.”

“I hope so,” Lottie said. “I’d like to see Kathy as happy as we are.”

Kent must have decided that he was done talking because he began to kiss her, and Lottie willingly let him. Her feelings for him spread through her entire body, from her beating heart clear to her toes.

She felt so overwhelmed with her emotions and knew she had fallen deeply in love with this wonderful man. For so long, she recognized that she had just gone through her life, mainly just existing, especially since her mother’s and sister’s deaths.

She now had a man she could lean on, someone she trusted with her feelings, with who she was.

She had traveled to Nevada in an effort to start a new life for herself. She hadn’t expected romance, but she’d found it in Kent.

O*ne month later*

Kent sat on a thick wooden log with Lottie by his side, a large fire burning in front of them. His parents sat on hard-back chairs that he had carried out of the house for them and set under a nearby shade tree.

The yard was filled with neighbors and friends, celebrating the fall harvest together. Many of them were people who had been invited to his wedding reception with Lottie, even though he hadn't known any of them.

When they were planning this party, Lottie had reminded him of her promise to those who attended that they would be invited. At the time, Kent hadn't been too happy with her words, but now he was glad that she had done so.

It had been four weeks since they'd caught the gang. Sheriff Jenson had paid them a visit a few days after Operation Heaven and informed them that the entire gang was wanted in several western states and territories.

Two of his deputies had been able to catch the man who had taken

Kent's father, and they were now all in prison. A few of the men were willing to talk in exchange to not have to spend the rest of their lives in prison.

They had informed the sheriff of where they were storing the loot they had stolen from many other people, including a large pile of ore from the mine. They also found Kent's cattle among hundreds of others that they had rustled in a small valley surrounded by mountains.

When Kent found out about the location of his cattle, he organized a group of men who lived close by to gather his herd. Even though these men hadn't lost any of their animals, Kent had been amazed at their willingness to help.

"Neighbors help each other," one man had told him when Kent questioned him. "That's the only way we can be successful in these parts."

Kent realized that Lottie's suggestion at having the miners help catch the gang members that had been tormenting them should have also included the men who owned ranches around them.

Lottie tucked her hand in Kent's arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. She sighed with contentment.

"Happy?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Have I told you my story about fishing in the lake in those mountains?" a neighbor, Harvey Simpson, called out as he pointed to the nearby peaks in the dim evening light.

“Harvey, I think everyone here has heard that story,” another man, Jed Powell, said with a scoff.

“I know for a fact that Kent hasn’t,” Harvey answered, looking to Kent for encouragement.

“I’d love to hear your fish story if you want to tell it,” Kent said obligingly.

Harvey looked thrilled. “Well, I decided one morning that I been working way too much. My son, who was ten at the time, Luke, suggested we go fishing, and I thought that it was a fine idea.

“My woman was willing to cook up anything we caught.” Harvey smiled at his wife, who sat beside him.

“We’d either eat what he caught or have gumbo soup,” she laughed. The other women joined in, as if they were well aware of what she was talking about.

“So, me and Luke walked up that mountain over yonder. It took all morning to get up there, but boy, was it worth it when we found the lake. It was tucked in the middle of these high mountains.

“The water was clear and ice cold. It was the most beautiful spot on God’s green Earth, let me tell you.” Harvey peered over his spectacles at Kent. “You should go to that lake sometime.”

“I think I will,” Kent agreed. This was the third time he’d heard about this lake and he vowed he’d make a trip to it sometime, with Lottie.

He wondered if it was the lake he’d tried to find when Lottie had first arrived, the water source that fed the streams on his land.

“Anyways, once we made it to the lake, we set up camp along its shores. The lake was full of fish. They was jumping and splashing, almost as if they was glad we were there.”

Harvey let out a laugh. “It didn’t take long for Luke to catch the first trout. I was proud of him, let me tell you. We fished all day and between the two of us, we caught ten fish.

“Just when we decided to head home, Luke suggested we cast our lines one more time. And that’s when it happened.” Harvey paused in his story, still looking at Kent.

“What happened?” Kent obliged him by asking.

Harvey gave a decisive nod. “That’s when I caught the biggest fish. Now, mind you, I’ve been up there to that lake many times since, and I’ve never caught one so big.”

“How big was it?” a small boy asked, his eyes wide with wonder.

Harvey stood up. “It was this big.” He held his arms out, showing that this fish he’d caught was at least two feet long.

“Wow,” the boy said, and his eyes got even bigger.

“That fish gets bigger every time you tell this story, Harvey,” another man, George Landon, complained and everyone laughed.

Harvey waved his hand at George. “Now, let me tell you what happened next. I pulled that fish onto shore, and it looked right at me. I could tell that it didn’t want to lose his life that day.

“I figured we’d caught enough fish and besides trying to carry that big fella down the mountain wouldn’t have been too much fun. So

I said to it, 'I'll let you go if you promise to not let yourself get caught on another hook. You can live a long life if you do.'

"The fish flopped at my words, and I swear it told me that it wouldn't ever make that mistake again. I removed the hook ever so careful, and it slipped into the water. It stayed by the shore for a few seconds, as if it wanted to tell me thanks before swimming away."

"That's a great story," Kent spoke up.

"George, why don't you tell everyone about the time you met a bear?" Harvey asked after giving Kent a nod of thanks.

Lottie bent her head toward Kent. "Let's go for a walk."

He smiled at her and pulled her to her feet. They walked away from the group without anyone noticing that they were leaving.

He heard laughter at something George said and then their voices faded as they moved away.

"This has been a fun evening, but it's nice to have some time to ourselves," Lottie said. She kept her hand tucked through his arm as they walked slowly, not really having a destination in mind.

"I'm so pleased at how well the ranch is doing," Kent said. "Even though we got our cattle back, I'm glad Father gave us the money the mine earned from the ore we saved."

Even though they were able to recover most of the cattle that had been taken, most of them had gotten thin and ragged. They had been pushed hard from the ranch to the valley where the gang had kept them, which was almost a day's ride away.

Getting them back to the ranch had taken quite a bit of time because of how they had been treated, and they had lost three cows. Lottie had suggested that they not send any of their cattle to market that year, allowing them to recover and grow fat again, and Kent had agreed.

Grant's investment would go a long way in getting through the coming Nevada winter.

"I have some news for you that I'm hoping you will like," Lottie said, almost coyly.

Her tone of voice told Kent that what she had to say was important, so he stopped and looked at her. For a moment, he didn't hear a word she said.

He marveled at how blessed he was that she was his wife. She was so beautiful as the light of the moon shone on them, almost making a halo around her.

"Did you hear me?" Lottie asked, breaking through his thoughts.

"I'm sorry," he answered, chagrined. "I was thinking about how beautiful you are."

Lottie lightly hit him on his arm. "I'm trying to tell you that you will be a father in seven months."

"What?" he asked, at first wondering if he had heard correctly. Then her words penetrated his brain. "Really?"

Lottie laughed. "Yes. You know how I went into town this morning with Mary? Well, I paid a visit to Dr. Martin, and he confirmed that we will be having a little one join us in the spring."

Kent felt so happy he couldn't contain himself. He picked her up and swung her around in a circle. She shrieked at the sudden movement and her eyes widened. "Put me down!"

Kent immediately complied. "What's wrong?" he asked, noticing that she had grown pale.

Lottie hung onto his arm for a long moment as she closed her eyes and took a few long breaths. Soon, the color returned to her cheeks, and she smiled faintly at him.

"I guess you shouldn't spin me around for a while. I got really dizzy."

Kent gathered her into his arms, this time very carefully, and they stood that way for a long time. "I am so happy that you are expecting. I don't want you to do anything around the ranch, though."

"But—"

He interrupted her, knowing that she was going to argue with him.

"I've been thinking about hiring a few men to help out. We've talked about building a bunkhouse. I'm sure we can have it up in a few weeks if the men I hire are willing to help."

He knew he'd said the wrong thing when she put her hands on her hips and glared.

"I'll have you know that my ma worked on our farm right up until she had me. I don't want to be treated like an invalid just because I'm pregnant."

“I probably shouldn’t move the herd or ride Lady in a full gallop,” she allowed, “but I can still milk the cow and take care of the chickens and...”

Kent would have preferred Lottie just stayed in the house and spent the next few months sewing clothes and knit blankets for the baby, but he also knew she wouldn’t be happy with that lifestyle.

She liked being outdoors and he would just need to keep an eye on her. Instead of continuing the discussion, he drew her close to him and placed a soft kiss on her lips, which effectively silenced her.

He smiled to himself at this discovery. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he deepened the kiss.

“We’d better get back to our guests,” Lottie whispered a long moment later.

Kent agreed, and keeping her hand in his, he wondered when he would be able to tell everyone that he was going to be a father.

T*en years later*

Lottie woke up early, like she usually did, just before the sun rose. She quickly dressed and then shook Kent awake.

He still had a hard time waking up in the mornings, but once he was awake, he did the work of two men all day long.

“I’m going to get the kids up,” she told him and then left their bedroom. She entered the room across the hall where her eight-year-old twin sons were sleeping.

“Will, Tom. Time to rise and shine,” she said as she shook their shoulders. Will immediately sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Tom, very much like his father, groaned and rolled over.

“Get dressed and meet me in the barn. We have a lot to do today.”

Lottie entered the next room but hesitated. Her five-year-old daughter’s legs hung half off the bed.

She really didn’t want to wake her, but if Beth found out that they had done the morning chores without her, she would be angry and

hurt that she hadn't been included.

Lottie would have preferred to let her sleep until breakfast was ready, mainly because Beth would need to take a nap after lunch or else she would be whining and crying the rest of the afternoon.

But Lottie didn't have the heart to leave Beth out, and she shook the girl awake. Beth sat up, gave her a quick mischievous smile, left her bed, and began to leave the room.

"Beth, you need to get dressed first," Lottie reminded her.

"I want to check the kittens. You told me I could first thing in the morning," Beth whined.

The barn cat had given birth to four kittens the day before and Beth had been very interested in them from the moment of their arrival, much to the mama cat's dismay.

Lottie gave her a firm look. "First thing after you get dressed."

Beth gave a huge sigh but began to remove her nightgown. Lottie helped her put on her dress, stockings and shoes.

She quickly braided her daughter's hair, and they went down the stairs together, Beth skipping in front of her.

Outside, the boys were already running to the barn. Lottie hurried after them, doing her best to keep Beth in her sight.

Over the next hour, Lottie supervised while Will and Tom mucked out the stalls and fed the horses. Beth spent most of her time at the kittens' side, although she kept her hands to herself after the mother cat swiped a sharp claw at her.

Lottie milked their two cows, poured each pail into the large metal milk jug, and covered it to keep the bugs out. “Beth, come help me with the chickens.”

She knew Beth wanted to refuse, so she gave her another one of her ‘you had better listen to me’ looks. Beth clamped her mouth shut, and followed her outside toward the chicken coop.

Lottie did her best to keep her smile to herself. Beth reminded her so much of when she had been a young girl.

She also had wanted to be part of things around their small farm, but also had been more interested in the animals they’d owned rather than the daily chores that needed to be done.

When they reached the coop, she allowed Beth to scatter feed on the ground while Lottie gathered the eggs. She listened to Beth chatter about the kittens, noticing that she had already given each one of them names.

She didn’t have the heart to inform her daughter that they wouldn’t be keeping any of them. They had enough barn cats, but she figured there was time enough to break the bad news to her later.

“Can I help feed the orphan calves?” Beth asked when they left the coop with a full basket of eggs.

“No. I need you to run these eggs into the house so Sarah can use them for breakfast.”

“Okay, Mama,” Beth agreed and grabbed the basket. Lottie held her breath as the basket tipped and a few of the eggs fell to the dirt. “Oh, no!”

Beth's face looked up in horror. "Sorry, Mama."

"Take the rest of the eggs in the house, carefully."

She nodded and walked slowly toward the house, the basket held in front of her with both hands. This time, Lottie did smile. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she jerked around.

"Good morning, beautiful." Kent stood in front of her, the same smile that Beth inherited on his face, beaming down on her. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"I don't know what I'd do without you. The cows are milked, the stalls mucked, the chickens fed." He glanced at the two broken eggs on the ground.

"Daisy!" he called, and their cattle dog ran to Kent's side. When she saw the eggs, she made quick work of them.

Lottie began to walk back to the barn. "I need to check on the boys. We have extra milk for the calves."

Kent nodded. They had three orphan calves in a nearby field who had been either rejected by their mamas or they had died.

He filled up their makeshift bottles with milk and began to feed the calves. "I think they're about ready to join the herd," Kent commented as Lottie helped. She nodded in agreement.

The sun had fully risen over the eastern mountains when the morning chores were completed. Lottie, Kent, and their sons went into the house, ready for breakfast.

The table was full of food and Sarah placed a large plate of

pancakes in the middle of the table. Grant and Mary were already seated in their chairs. She smiled at them.

“Good morning.”

Mary gave her usual soft smile. “Are you ready for today?”

Lottie shrugged and turned her attention to the children, who each took their seats. Kent gave a prayer over the food and then the next few minutes saw everyone busily filling their plates.

“When is Papa coming?” Will asked, speaking of Lottie’s father.

When the boys had been small, they’d had a hard time remembering her maiden name, Pelletier, so her father had become Papa to them.

“We’re supposed to pick him up at the train station at noon,” Lottie answered.

“I’m so excited to see him again,” Tom said eagerly. “Do you think he’ll take us fishing?”

“I’m sure he will,” Kent responded.

Lottie quickly finished her breakfast and then stood up.

“Where are you going?” Kent asked curiously.

“I’m going to make sure everything is good at his cabin,” Lottie replied before escaping out the door.

Lottie walked the short distance to the nearby two-room cabin that Kent had built especially for her father. She was so happy that he

had finally agreed to move west from Maine.

She had been trying for years to talk her father into moving to their ranch. He always had some reason why he couldn't.

He needed to find a buyer for the farm. Then he didn't want to be a burden when Lottie found out she was carrying twins.

When he'd finally found a job that he enjoyed in Ashton, Lottie had stopped asking him to come.

Finally, about six months ago, Kent had taken her to Maine to see him. She had been thrilled to be able to see her father after so many years apart.

It was then, between the two of them, that they were able to convince him to move west—especially when they'd found out that her father was no longer working because he had injured his hip and had a hard time walking.

She let herself into the cabin and it didn't take her long to see that everything was the way she wanted it. When they had returned from their visit to Maine, Kent had immediately begun construction on this small home for her father.

It wasn't very big, only two rooms—one to sleep in and the other as a living area. There was a small kitchen, but Lottie fully expected her father to join them for his meals, just like Grant and Mary did.

Kathy had helped Lottie make curtains, pillows, and a quilt for the bed. A braided rug covered the floor in the living area.

Confident that the small cabin was ready for her father, she sat

down at the kitchen table for a moment and thought about all the many changes that had happened in her life since she left Maine to be a mail-order bride.

Kent's parents had left Denver behind soon after the twins were born. Mary had been eager and willing to take care of them when Lottie was busy helping Kent on the ranch.

They had lived with them for a while until Grant finally decided that he and Mary needed their own home. He hired some men to build a home almost as large as the one Kent and Lottie lived in.

Shortly thereafter, Kathy and Riley married. Lottie and Kathy had grown close as two sisters could.

Kathy already had one girl the same age as Beth and, after losing two babies at birth, finally was able to carry another little girl who was now six months old.

When it was finally time to leave for Green Valley, Lottie couldn't contain her excitement any longer. She was so happy that her father was finally going to be living so close.

Kent seemed to understand her impatience and kept the horses that pulled their wagon in a trot towards town.

When they arrived at the train station, Lottie jumped easily from the bench, supervised the children as they left the back of the wagon, and made her way to the office to make sure it was going to arrive on time.

Kent drove the wagon further down the street to find a safe place to park it before joining them.

Ten minutes later, Lottie could hear the train horn announcing its arrival. Kent kept a firm grip on Will's and Tom's hands to keep them from darting onto the tracks.

Beth stood at Lottie's side, bouncing on her feet in excitement. "Is it coming?" she asked.

"The train will be here in a moment," Lottie responded, wishing she could bounce on her feet like Beth was doing, but she kept herself in check and acted like a lady should.

Over the years, Mary had learned to accept Lottie as she was, but she had also gently encouraged her to act like a lady in certain social circumstances. Lottie had allowed Mary's hints, knowing that she made the suggestions because she cared and not as criticism.

Lottie also recognized that Kent had been raised in high society, and since he was so willing to accept her poor background, without wanting to change her into something she wasn't, she figured she could do the same for him.

There were a few times when Lottie had been thrust into formal situations where she was glad she'd had Mary's tutelage.

"It's here," Will shouted unnecessarily as the train moved slowly into the station. When it stopped, their small group watched anxiously as passengers got off the train.

A few minutes later, Lottie began to feel anxious. What if her father wasn't on the train? What if something had happened to him, that he had gotten sick or injured or...?

But then she saw him as he slowly stepped down the steps to the

wooden platform.

“Papa!” Tom shouted and ran to the older man’s side. Lottie hurried after her son, marveling that he had known who her father was, even though Tom had never met him before.

When her father saw her, he dropped the bag he was carrying and wrapped his arms around her.

“I’m so glad you made it safe and sound,” Lottie said, her face buried into his shoulder. She noticed that he seemed a little thinner and weaker than when she’d last seen him.

“It’s good to be here,” her father agreed before stepping away. “And who are these lads and beautiful young lady?”

Beth giggled a bit shyly. “We’re your grandchildren.”

Lottie quickly introduced them and then watched as Kent shook her father’s hand in welcome. Chaos ensued for a few minutes before Kent slowly moved them away from the train platform.

Her father pointed out his trunks and Kent gave a few coins to some older boys who hung around the train station for this purpose—to carry the trunks to the nearby wagon.

The trip back to the ranch was wonderful for Lottie. She didn’t say much, but enjoyed how comfortable her children were with her father right from the moment they met.

He seemed equally enthralled with his grandchildren.

When they arrived at the ranch, Kent parked the wagon in front of her father’s new home. Lottie allowed the children to show their

grandfather his new home and then sent them to their house.

She wanted some time alone with her father, and she could tell that he was exhausted and would likely benefit with some rest. Kent seemed to understand and after carrying the trunks into the house, he herded the children back into the wagon for the short drive to the barn.

“Do you want me to help you unpack?” Lottie offered once they were alone.

Her father shook his head and sat wearily in one of the two stuffed sofas Kent had purchased for him. Lottie glanced at the unopened trunks but sat on the other sofa.

“I’m so happy that you’re finally here,” she told him.

“I’m glad, too.” He smiled at her. “As I traveled from Maine, I thought about how you made this trip on your own ten years ago, all because of me.”

“Pa, I’ve told you before that I really believe what happened was meant to be. I couldn’t have found a better husband than I did with Kent. I am very happy here.”

“And that is the only reason why I don’t let myself feel too guilty about what happened.” He sighed and sadness flooded his face. “I missed your mother and Ellen so much back then.

“Still do, if I’m being honest. But I recognize that I did you a disservice in not acknowledging that I did have a wonderful daughter who was still alive.”

“I understand your grief,” Lottie said, trying to comfort him. “I

miss them, too.”

She reached out and took his hand, noting how many more wrinkles he had. Her father was definitely growing older and she was grateful to have the opportunity to spend his final years with him.

“I have a new family, though, which has helped me move on.”

Pa nodded. “In Kent and those wonderful children of yours.”

“Yes, and in his family. Kent’s parents had a difficult time accepting me at first, but they have more than made up for it, once they got used to me. And Kathy is like a sister to me. I hope my new family can become yours.”

They spoke for another few minutes until Lottie decided to leave and let her father get some rest. After telling him that dinner would be ready at six, she left him in his new house.

As she walked toward her house, she thought of how easily her father had interacted with her children. It reminded her of how he had been with her and Ellen when they were girls.

Will, Tom, and Beth now had three grandparents who would love and spoil them.

Kent left the barn just as Lottie entered their yard. “How is he doing?” he asked.

“He’s fine, just tired,” Lottie reassured him.

“That’s understandable,” Kent commented. He glanced at the corral and Lottie noticed that two horses were saddled, their reins tied on

the fence.

“Do you have time to take a trip up to the cliff?” he asked. “I’ve already asked Mother to keep an eye on the kids.”

“I’d love to,” Lottie responded, happiness flooding through her.

Even though she had expected to spend the afternoon at her father’s side, now that he was in his home, resting, she realized she had nothing to do.

A ride up to their special place sounded wonderful.

Kent had saddled Lady and Jack. Both horses were no longer used to work with the cattle, but still were excellent horses for short jaunts.

He made sure their canteens were filled with fresh water and they soon were on their way. They rode in silence toward the mountains.

Lottie thought of the many times they had gone to the cliff, the same place where they had first ridden together in the mountains in an attempt to keep away from Grant’s guests. This cliff had become their special place where they went to spend some alone time with each other.

The dirt trail was well worn, showing the many times they used this path. As it led into the mountains, it wound back and forth.

The path eventually led all the way to the lake that provided all the water the ranch needed.

They had taken their three children to the lake many times and

Luke was the one who had named it Mirror Lake, because the surrounding mountains reflected on its waters certain times of the day.

When they arrived on the cliff, Kent helped her down and then secured Lady's reins next to Jack's. Holding hands, they stood near the edge of the cliff and looked over the ranch.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, Lottie marveled at the beauty of this area.

The ranch was much larger than it had been ten years ago. They owned many more cattle. She could see their houses in the distance and a new barn that had been built because they'd needed the extra room a few years ago.

She could see Kathy and Riley's smaller house that they'd build near the old cabin, which had eventually been torn down. They still ran the mine, but Riley also raised horses and Lottie could see some of them in a field near their house.

Kent moved behind her and draped his arms around her waist.

"Happy?" he asked her needlessly.

Lottie turned so she was facing him, her arms still around her. Instead of answering, she kissed his cheek.

Of course, Kent took advantage of her being in his arms and for a few minutes, they were focused on each other. The loud call of a crow made Lottie jump. She laughed as they broke apart.

"For some reason, I've been thinking about everything that we've gone through together since you came into my life," Kent said. "I

feel like now that your father is here, we've come full circle.

"I'm sure there will be many things we will continue to share together, good and bad. But I'm glad that Kathy made me place that ad and that you were the one that answered it."

Lottie smiled, her hand on his cheek. "And I'm glad you had a dream]and were willing to do whatever you had to do to make it come true."

"And you are a part of it," Kent replied.

"And I am a part of it," she agreed.

She stood by Kent's side, her arm still around her. A golden eagle flew in the wind below them and they watched until the bird moved out of sight.

She knew they would need to return home soon. But right now, she was content to be at her husband's side—a place where she wanted to be forever.